

# interzone

SPRING 2004

NUMBER 193

£3.50

## Alastair Reynolds

Dominic Green

John Meaney

Darrell Schweitzer

Liz Williams

plus David Langford, Gary Westfahl

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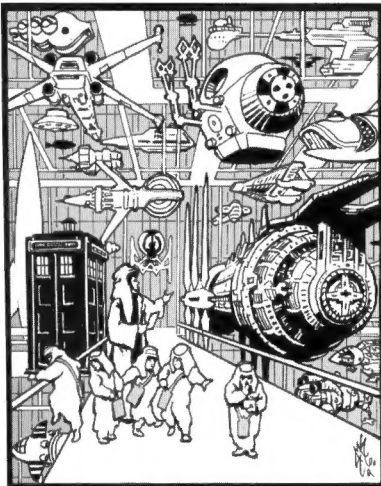
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**BRIGHTON AREA** readers of *Interzone* are welcome to join us on Friday nights at The Mitre, a friendly pub on Baker Street (near the Open Market). A few of us meet from 9-11pm, in the smaller of the two rooms, for informal drink and chat. You'll recognize us by the copies of *IZ* or other sf publications lying around – so come along and make yourselves known. (Editors.)



## COMING NEXT ISSUE

The magazine will be under new management, but we're passing on a full line-up of material. It includes an excellent long story by Eric Brown, "Approaching Omega," plus good stories by other favourites, and an interview with artist Dominic Harman (who has also illustrated Eric's story and done the cover). So look out for *Interzone* number 194, the first of a new incarnation!



Vignettes by SMS

**Editor & Publisher**  
David Pringle

**Assistant Editors**  
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Andy Robertson

**Graphic Design  
and Typesetting**  
Paul Brazier

**Advisory Editors**  
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Malcolm Edwards  
Judith Hanna  
Lee Montgomerie  
Simon Ounsley

**Incoming publisher**  
Andy Cox

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disposable manuscript (marked as  
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# interzone

science fiction & fantasy

SPRING 2004

Number 193

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### Cover by SMS

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**F**irst, the bad news:

With effect from the next issue, number 194, I shall be standing down as editor and publisher of *Interzone*. This is for a combination of reasons, familial and financial – and also, it must be admitted, because of a certain weariness after 22 years at the helm (not, I hasten to add, a weariness with the authors and fiction we publish, but rather with the whole business side of running a magazine). The present issue, number 193, should have been dated “January/February,” but as you can see it is coming out later than that and so has been re-dated “Spring 2004.” My apologies for keeping everyone waiting for this, my last-published issue.

Now, the good news:

*Interzone* will continue, with Andy Cox as editor and publisher. He has agreed to take over all the duties of running the magazine, and to honour the ongoing readers’ subscriptions. Beginning in the early summer, with issue 194, *IZ* should reappear, on an initial bimonthly schedule (with the possibility of returning to monthly at a future date), as a publication of Andy Cox’s TTA Press. Andy has been running his own quarterly, *The Third Alternative*, for just over ten years now, so he knows how to produce a good magazine. In a business sense – and, I think, in every sense – his is a safe pair of hands.

Andy will not be merging *Interzone* with *The Third Alternative*, but will continue to produce both magazines as separate entities. He is keen that *IZ* should remain primarily a science-fiction magazine, and he will not attempt to slant it more in the direction of horror, fantasy, or “slipstream” (TTA will remain the main organ for those types of writing). He is also keen that some of *IZ*’s present editorial team should remain on the masthead, in advisory capacities at least. Although there may be small changes

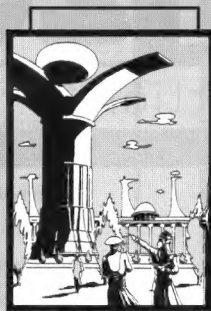
in format and appearance, it is not his intention to change the essential nature of the magazine: its focus will still be on well-written short stories, mainly of a science-fictional type.

Readers whose subscriptions are ongoing should receive the relaunched magazine, direct from Andy’s TTA Press, in due course. Those whose subscriptions lapse with this issue – you can tell if there is a “(193)” after your name on the mailing label – are invited to renew their subscriptions by sending cheques, postal orders or credit-card details directly to: TTA Press, 5 Martins Lane, Witcham, Ely, Cambs. CB6 2LB, UK. For the time being, the subscription rates remain the same – £20 for six issues in the UK, or £23 for six issues overseas. (Website: [www.ttapress.com](http://www.ttapress.com).)

My thanks to all those who have helped produce *Interzone* over the years, from Simon Ounsley, Lee Montgomerie and many others in the early days through to the continuing helpers of more recent times – especially the heroic slushpile-readers, Andy Robertson and Andrew Tidmarsh. A special word also for Paul Brazier, the magazine’s typesetter and designer for the past nine years, guest-editor of several issues, and copious book-reviewer (see his contribution to the review section in this issue). Without Paul’s input, it would all have been much more difficult to do in the past few years.

I do hope that all our readers will continue to support *Interzone* under its new ownership, and that you will continue to enjoy the magazine for many years to come. It only remains for me to express my gratitude to you all – a deepfelt thanks for all the friendship, enthusiasm and concern that readers have expressed over two decades and more – and to wish you, and the magazine, all the best for the future.

**David Pringle**



**INTERFACE**

Dear David:

I have been quietly astonished at your ability to maintain the enthusiasm and commitment to keep *Interzone* going at such a level for so long – long enough, now, that it ranks in the all-time top ten for sf magazine longevity. It’s worth reflecting on the scale of this achievement. For what it’s worth, the magazines which have lasted longer are (in approximate order):

- 1) *Astounding/Analog* (800+ issues)
- 2) *Amazing Stories* (600+ issues)
- 3) *Fantasy & Science Fiction* (600+

issues)

- 4) *Asimov’s SF* (300+ issues)
- 5) *Weird Tales* (279 issues plus revivals)
- 6) *Galaxy* (254 issues)
- 7) *Fantastic* (208 issues)
- 8) *New Worlds* (201 issues plus extensions)
- 9) *Interzone* (192 and counting)
- 10) *If* (175 issues) or possibly:
- 10) *Science Wonder Stories/Wonder Stories/Thrilling Wonder Stories* (179 issues if you count it as one continuous publication)

In the history of sf magazine publishing, only John W. Campbell, Stan Schmidt, Ed Ferman and Gardner Dozois have edited a magazine for more issues – and, it follows, nobody in the 80 year history of sf magazines has edited a title for as many issues or as many years continuously from its inception. You definitely deserve a break!

I very much hope that Andy Cox will be able to continue the magazine for a good few years to come.

**Malcolm Edwards**  
*Orion Publishing, London*

Dear Editors:

From time to time you print letters from people who’d like *Interzone* to be different. You’ve heard from people who aren’t interested in the non-fiction and want an all-stories magazine. You’ve heard from those who think essays about the history of sf are boring. “I like this, I don’t like that”. And so on. Paul de Bakker (*IZ* 192) would like more hard sf and less fantasy.

I’m sure that, for every comment of this kind, there are many silent readers who disagree. For example: though I enjoy the fiction, it’s the non-fiction I turn to first (“Ansible Link,” Nick Lowe’s clever – sometimes “too clever by half” – film reviews, the enjoyably long book reviews,...).

Another “for example”: like Paul, I’m a scientist. But if I want the “sense of wonder” that real science can provide I go to *New Scientist* or the scientific journals for that. I don’t go to *IZ* for it. Like Paul, I’m old enough to feel nostalgic about the sf of the 1950s and ’60s. But I don’t expect *IZ* to recreate its flavour. It wouldn’t be possible anyway, the world has moved on. I also like fantasy. I know many people don’t, they like stories set in the “real” world, or at least in a possible world. Fantasy is set in the world of imagination. Imagination is what story-telling is all about. *IZ* calls itself a magazine “of science fiction and fantasy.” And that’s what it is. That’s what I like about it.

I began by criticizing readers who tell you what they like and what they don’t like. I then went on to do just that! But it’s all irrelevant isn’t it? It’s just the personal preference (prejudice?) of a single reader. The point is that we, your readers, are all different. We read *Interzone* for different reasons. You can’t please all the people all the time, but the range and variety of *IZ*’s contents provide something of interest to each of us in every issue. That’s why we keep reading it, and why it’s successful.

**Eric Lord**  
*Bangalore, India*



## **Peter T. Garratt** **1949-2004**

We announce, with great sadness, that *Interzone* author, helper and friend Peter Garratt died suddenly on 2nd March 2004, aged 54. He was one of the most generous of people, and we shall miss him very much.

It was in 1982, the year *Interzone* began and I moved to Brighton, that we began our Friday-night meetings (now held at the Mitre pub) – ostensibly for science-fiction enthusiasts, but really open gatherings for just about anybody and everybody of our acquaintance, and for good talk about every subject under the sun. Those meetings will continue, I hope, in Pete's honour.

Pete's friendships, and his influence, were very wide. Many, many people – probably thousands over the years – knew him socially, from pubs and clubs and social events, from writers' circles and science-fiction or crime-writers' conventions, from his activities in Liberal politics and in environmental groups, from his profession as a clinical psychologist, or simply through his stories in magazines and books.

We published ten stories by Peter in *Interzone*, over a period of nearly 20 years. But he also had stories in many other magazines, and a number of them were reprinted in anthologies. He contributed quite a few original tales to sf and fantasy, or seafaring and historical anthologies edited by Mike Ashley, and to crime-fiction anthologies edited by Maxim Jakubowski. In fact, there were nearly 40 published stories from his pen. Looking through the list of his published stories, I was struck

*continued on page 47*



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Since we merged *SF Nexus* 4 into *Interzone* 88 ten years ago and I became *Interzone*'s production editor, I have typeset and designed almost every issue, guest edited several, and managed to make sure each issue was filled. It has been interesting and exhilarating and I have loved every minute of it.

As the title is moving to TTA Press, I am taking the opportunity to demerge myself. I wish Andy the best of luck, but British SF needs more than one publisher of fantastic fiction and I hope to plug that gap.

I will not, however, be publishing a new magazine. As has been proved, simply publishing a magazine, no matter how good, is no guarantee of success.

Instead, I intend to move into the cyberworld and produce an interactive website. Details have yet to be finalised, but by the time this advert sees print you should be able to find me on the web and see what I am up to.

In the meantime, I have approached several authors who have agreed to write for the new site. They are listed on the right.

Come on over to Quercus-SF and see what we're up to.

**Paul Brazier**

The following authors have promised stories for the new site.

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**Geoff Ryman**

**Liz Williams**

# QUERCUS-SF.COM



# Everlasting

*Alastair Reynolds*

**M**oira Curbishley followed the yellow beacon of a gritting lorry all the way up the hill, her Volvo's windscreen wipers working hard against snow. Another car had cruised up behind her and was now flashing its headlights. She couldn't see the driver, but the low, dark shape of the car suggested something flash: a BMW or Mercedes, maybe an Audi. At this time of night there was very little traffic coming the other way, but whenever Moira even thought of overtaking – edging out slightly, just until she could begin to see along the side of the gritting lorry – another pair of headlights always made a miraculous appearance. Moira nipped back into the wake of the lorry, the car behind delivering its opinion with another round of headlight-flashing.

“Tosser,” Moira said.

She was grateful when she reached the brow of the hill and was able to turn off from the main road, even though she was now travelling down a high-hedged, meandering and pot-holed country lane that had not been gritted. At least she had the road to herself, and could drive at the pace that suited her. She kept the car in second, oozing cautiously around blind bends, watchful for cars or tractors coming the other way, but doubting that she would meet any other traffic.

Soon she saw the familiar landmark of the hump-backed bridge. She negotiated it slowly, her headlights shining high into the trees on the opposite side of the brook. The lights illuminated a pair of perched barn owls, freezing them into immobility. They looked like small stone ornaments, the kind you could buy in craft shops. Beyond, some way up the lane, Moira saw the lights of Ian's cottage.

He had called her about an hour earlier, sounding in a bad way. Not exactly depressed and suicidal – he was actually talking about how he *wasn't* going to kill him-

self – but manic and over-excited: a state of mind that she considered nearly as dangerous. With Ian's history it could quickly turn nasty. She wished, now, that she had kept him on the phone – kept talking to him – rather than promising to drive over. She should have checked the weather first, not to mention the time of day. But once Moira had put down the phone she knew that she could not back out of her promise.

“Bloody Ian,” she said.

They had met about 15 years ago, during their last year at college. Both had been members of the skydiving society: Ian because he took it very seriously, Moira because she had fancied someone else in the club. It hadn't worked out for her, but she had developed an on-off interest in parachuting that she had kept up for a few years after graduation. And she had met Ian: not really her type, but good enough company that they'd meet socially away from the club. The thing Moira liked about him was that he was always fizzing with daft enthusiasms. During that last year she had lost count of the amazing get-rich schemes Ian intended to get into when he had his degree. She had to hand it to him: Ian had been convinced mobile phones were going to be huge, back when everyone else thought they were never going to be much use except as exercise aids. But – typical Ian – he hadn't actually done anything about it. For a while, before anyone had heard of web pages, he had pottered around with computers, constructing graphical interfaces to simplify internet navigation and file-transfer. Some of the ideas Ian had shown her then were *brilliant*: she was convinced, even now, that if he'd only stuck with it, the world would have swerved onto a different track, one in which it was Ian Caldicot who was the ‘father of the web’. But, no: another enthusiasm had diverted him, and his computers had sat gathering dust while he played



around with radio-controlled battling pterodactyls made from balsa-wood. Moira had never quite worked out where all the money came from, but Ian didn't waste a penny of it on himself. The cottage was crumbling, and his wardrobe was basically what he had been wearing during college.

"Bloody Ian," Moira said again.

She slowed, recognizing the farm gate. A dozen yards further on was the turning onto Ian's drive. It was still snowing. She oozed the car around the bend, feeling the wheels spin before they bit into the gravel beneath the snow. She brought the car to a halt just in front of the cottage. Ian's Metro was a blue-white wedge parked in front of the derelict garage. Snow made all cars look exciting and sleek, Moira thought: like concept models fresh from the wind-tunnel.

She turned off the headlights and ignition and sat looking at the cottage for a few moments. Now that she was here, the possibilities crowded in on her. Again, she thought back to the telephone conversation: Ian emphatic that he wasn't going to kill himself. If Ian had decided not to kill himself, then at some point he had presumably toyed with the alternative. Knowing Ian's general inability to stick to one decision for more than a few minutes, Moira couldn't help but worry about him changing his mind again.

What if he had done it while she was driving over? What if there was no one living in that house now? It looked so warm and inviting, with the window on the lower floor casting an oblong of yellow light across the smooth carpet snow before it. What if she had to wait here until the police and ambulance men came?

Moira got out of the Volvo, shut the door behind her and walked towards the front door. From far back along the country lane she heard the call of an owl: perhaps one of the pair she had seen earlier.

She knocked on the front door. Ian opened it. He wore red tracksuit bottoms and a grubby yellow Levellers T-shirt. His feet were bare.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"So you bloody well should be," Moira said, tremendously relieved.

"I didn't realize how late it was. Or that it was snowing."

"That's your problem, Ian: you don't stop to think."

He smiled coyly. "Actually, I have been doing a bit of thinking. That's why I phoned."

"Very pleased to hear it. I was sick with worry, Ian."

"You'd better come in."

"Yes, I better had, hadn't I?"

Ian let her into the house. She kicked the snow from her shoes. The cottage had looked warm and inviting from the outside, like something on a Dickensian Christmas card. Inside it was still just a bit too cold for Moira's tastes. She took off her coat and hung it on the banister at the bottom of the stairs, grateful for the chunky sweater she had on beneath.

"Fancy a cuppa?" Ian asked.

She thought about having to drive back again, once she

had put her mind to rest about Ian.

"Coffee," she said. "Black. No sugar."

Moira followed him into the kitchen. It wasn't too bad, considering. The fact that there was only one light – a dim electric bulb hanging from the ceiling – helped to throw much of the room into shadow, disguising the junk and clutter. There were many cardboard boxes around the walls, piled two or three high. They had drawings of monitors and printers on them. There were ghostly white chunks of polystyrene packaging material. There was a balsa-wood pterodactyl, its wing broken, one black eye gleaming back at her from the alien swoosh of its skull. A metallic-orange mountain bike rested against a pantry door, minus wheels. At one end of the kitchen table stood a couple of cereal boxes, some jars of instant coffee, half a pint of milk and an empty Pot-Noodle container. There was nothing to eat or drink on the shelves. Instead of cookery books there were books on programming in Java, C and Perl, dog-eared paperbacks on Zen Buddhism, wild mushrooms and quantum mechanics, and a couple of Ben Elton novels Moira hadn't read.

He pushed a cup of coffee into her hands. She sat down in a rickety wooden chair on one side of the table, while Ian helped himself to the chair on the other side. Through the un-curtained window beyond Moira saw the snow continuing to fall.

"Mind if I smoke?" she asked, taking out a packet of cigarettes.

Ian rummaged under some pizza boxes and produced an ashtray. It was the stamped-metal kind students stole from pubs. "Hoped you might have given up by now."

Moira tapped a fingernail against the packet. "Not bloody likely. Lucky cigs. Remember?"

"Seriously?"

"Yes, seriously." She took a sip of the coffee, grateful that she hadn't needed milk in it. Ian's white coffee had little icebergs floating in it. "But this isn't about me. I didn't come here for a nice old chinwag. You worried me, Ian: all that talk about *not* going to kill yourself."

"I suppose I was a bit over-excited," Ian said.

"You aren't going to do it, are you?"

"That's not the point," Ian said. "I couldn't if I wanted to."

"I'm glad to hear it." Moira reached out across the table and took his hand. "I know you've had some bad luck, Ian, and I know things haven't always worked out quite the way you hoped. But life's not worked out too bad for either of us, has it?"

"You misunderstand," Ian said. Gently, he withdrew his hand. "I'm not talking about being unable to kill myself because I've rejected the idea of suicide. I'm talking about something far more fundamental."

Moira lit one of the cigarettes. She took a long draw on it, eyeing Ian the way she imagined prison psychologists eyed long-term offenders. "Which would be?"

"I've reached the conclusion that I'm immortal."

"I see," Moira said quietly.

"Do you?"

"Yes," she said, picking her words carefully. "I remember what you talked about the last time we were in the



pub: your latest mad enthusiasm. All that stuff you'd been reading about on the internet, about how no one living will ever die. At least not if they don't want to, and if they make the right arrangements. What did you call it? Exhibitionism?"

"Extropianism," Ian corrected, with a tolerant smile.

"Right. Getting your head frozen so they can revive you in the future? Or was it just about making sure you survive the next 30 years, so that you're still alive when the machines take over and grant us all eternal paradise? Waiting for the Singularity, wasn't it?" Moira drank some more of her coffee, noticing a pile of old popular science magazines on the table: *New Scientist*, *Scientific American*, stuff like that. "Sounded like bollocks to me, Ian, but you never know."

"It's not bollocks," he said. "Or it *might* be, but that's not the point, either. I'm not talking about achieving immortality through medicine or having my brain copied into a computer. Thinking about all the Extropian stuff was just the catalyst I needed to really see things clearly. But they're all missing the point. I've realized that immortality is a lot easier to achieve than anyone realizes."

She looked at the bookshelf again. "Magic mushrooms?"

"Maybe I shouldn't have phoned you after all."

"Look, I'm sorry, Ian. But you drag me out of hearth and home at some ungodly hour, wittering on about how you're thinking of killing yourself..."

"Thinking of *not* killing myself," he corrected.

"And when I get here – having nearly crashed the car at least twice – all you can do is rabbit on about sodding immortality. Sorry, Ian, but this is pub stuff. It's not getting Moira out of the house late at night stuff."

"Actually, I think it is." Ian reached across the table and pushed aside the pile of science magazines.

They had been hiding a gun.

"Fuck," Moira said. It was a handgun, a small revolver. It was horribly familiar, yet Moira did not remember ever seeing a real handgun in her life. "Please tell me that's a replica," she said.

"It is," Ian said. "But it's been converted into a real one. There's a website that shows you how to do it. You don't need any fancy tools, not if you already like to tinker around a bit." He nodded at the balsa wood dinosaur. Yes, Moira thought ruefully: Ian liked to tinker. If anyone could convert a replica gun into a real one, it was Ian Caldicot.

"I'm really not happy with this, Ian." She wanted to ask him where he had got it, whether it was in some way legal, but what she mainly wanted was the gun out of Ian's reach before he did something with it. "It's not loaded, is it?"

Ian picked up the gun and made the little revolving chamber swivel out, the way she had seen people do it in films. He held the chamber up to the light, lengthwise, so that Moira could see along the cylindrical holes where the bullets would have gone. Ian rotated the chamber slowly, until one blocked hole came into view.

"Can you show me to the phone, please?" Moira asked. "I think I need to ring someone."

"The phone's disconnected. You don't need it. You just need to sit here and listen to me, that's all."

Moira nodded: anything to keep Ian talking. "And then what?"

"Then I'm going to put the gun against my head and shoot it. And I'm going to keep doing it. Ten times, twenty times, thirty times. And you're going to sit there and watch me, and then you'll believe me."

Moira thought about grabbing the gun. Could she wrestle it out of Ian's hand without it going off? If she could get hold of it and run outside, she could throw it into one of the snowdrifts. It was dark out there, and the snow was still falling: if she gave it a good lob, she didn't think there'd be much chance of Ian finding it before morning.

But even as she was thinking of that, Ian slipped the gun down into the baggy pocket of his tracksuit bottoms.

No chance of reaching it now.

"I thought you said this was about immortality," Moira said, her voice faltering. "Playing Russian Roulette doesn't sound very much like immortality to me."

"You're right. But the point is I'm not *going* to kill myself. I just have to demonstrate the impossibility of that act in the most convincing way possible."

"Why me?"

"Because you're a friend. Because you've always listened and you've always had an open mind. Because I knew you'd come over."

"Because my name came early in your address book?"

Ian smiled. "You're under Moira, not Curbishley."

Moira sighed. "OK. Here's the deal. I'll listen. You can tell me whatever it is you want to tell me. But I don't want to see that gun again."

"You promise me you'll listen? That you won't laugh, or start arguing? Not until I'm done?"

"A deal is a deal."

But she was not certain Ian had agreed to his side of it.

"Do you know about the Many Worlds theory, Moira?"

"You've mentioned it before." Play along, she thought. Keep talking. "One of the quantum things, isn't it? Parallel worlds and all that?"

"Sort of. The idea that every time there's some kind of interaction in the universe – every time some particles or whatever crash into each other – then the universe splits into so many different copies, each of which corresponds to one of the possible outcomes."

Moira thought back to long pub conversations over last orders. "I think I get the gist."

"Of course, we only see one of those possible outcomes take place. So if we make some experiment in a lab that could produce result 'A' or result 'B', with an equal probability of each, we'll only see A or B, not both. But in reality the universe branches at that point, and there are counterparts of us who see the other result come out of the experiment."

"A bit like that cat thing you're always going on about," Moira said.

Ian brightened, obviously pleased that she remembered. "Yeah. You put a cat in a box with a radioactive source and a Geiger counter rigged to a vial of poison gas. If the radioactive source releases a particle – and it's got a fifty/fifty chance of doing so in a given period – then the



gas gets released and the moggy becomes an ex-moggy.”

“And then you open the box...”

Ian sipped his coffee, oblivious to the horrid lumps of spoilt milk. “And in one universe you get the dead cat. But in the other, the radioactive source didn’t go off. Remember there was only a fifty/fifty chance of it happening? This is the branch of the multiverse in which it didn’t. The cat’s still alive.”

Moira sensed that Ian was nearing the crux of his revelation. “All right,” she allowed.

“Now this is the clever bit. What happens next is that we take the *same* cat – give it a nice saucer of milk and a bit of Whiskas, of course – and put it back in the box. And run the experiment again. Same thing happens: the cat isn’t dead. What do you conclude?”

“You conclude that you could be in deep shit with the RSPCA, if they ever find out what you’ve been doing.”

“And apart from that?”

“I don’t know. That you’re in the branch in which the decay didn’t happen, again?”

“Yes,” Ian said. “But think about what that means: you’ve now switched onto the no-decay branch twice. Carry out the experiment again: same thing. Another time, and another time after that. You keep doing it, and every time *you can’t kill the bloody cat.*”

Moira raised a finger. “Only because you keep specifying that the cat must be alive. But if I did that experiment – say I tossed a coin, instead of going to all that trouble with Geiger counters and stuff – it wouldn’t work like that, would it? I might not kill the cat straight away, but after two or three goes I’m pretty sure I would.”

“But the point is, whenever you did kill the cat, there’d always be a counterpart of you – another Moira – which didn’t.”

“After one or two goes, maybe. But if I kept on not killing the cat, I’d begin to think it was a bit unusual: that something was wrong with the experiment. That’s not how it works, Ian. You can’t keep coming up heads. Sooner or later you always hit tails. Look, I’ve got a pound coin in my pocket here, I can prove –”

“No,” Ian said, correcting her gently. “Sooner or later one of you hits tails. But the other one comes up heads. And that’s how it keeps happening. No matter how improbable it seems, there’ll always be one counterpart of you that finds it impossible to kill the cat, no matter how many times they try.”

“But that’s absurd.”

“No, just very unlikely. Which doesn’t mean that that particular counterpart doesn’t exist: just that your chances of *being it* are very small. It’s like being the queen. Someone has to be the queen, even if any one person’s chances are tiny. Have you ever wondered how Her Maj feels, when she wakes up? Blow me, she must think. I’m the queen. I’m the sodding queen!”

“I’m sure she’s got used to it by now.”

“But the point still applies: logically, there’ll always be one counterpart who keeps ending up in the universe in which the cat doesn’t die. They might feel odd about it – they might look back at all the experiments they’ve run and feel a bit strange that they’ve been chosen as the one

who never gets to kill the cat. But if they take the Many Worlds theory seriously, they’ll have to conclude that *someone* had to end up never killing the cat. And when they finally do kill the cat, they’ll know that someone else – another counterpart of them – has just failed to kill it again. And that’s how it goes on.”

“For ever?”

“For ever and ever.”

They sat in silence for several moments, Moira once again wondering about the phone and the gun. If Ian had disconnected the phone, how difficult would it be to make it work again? If it was just a question of popping the connection back into the wall socket... she imagined herself fumbling it in, somehow managing to dial the police before Ian ripped the phone out of her hands... but no. That wouldn’t work: Ian was an inveterate tinkerer. He’d have opened the phone and removed something. And even if he hadn’t, even if she did magically get through to a warm human being, how long would it take them to get here?

And the gun: still no joy. She thought about shoving the table towards Ian, levering it up from her side so that it came crashing down on his knees, but unless she did it very quickly Ian would have time to move aside. The one thing she didn’t want to do was make him any angrier without getting the gun off him.

“So that’s it, is it?” she asked. “Your big revelation? In some remote twig of the infinitely-branching universe, there’ll always be a cat you can’t kill?”

For the first time Ian showed a flash of irritation. “There’s more to it than that. Much more. Frankly, Moira, I was hoping you’d have seen it for yourself by now.”

“Seen what?”

“The bigger picture. The cat in the box represents the outcome of just one quantum process: the tick of a Geiger counter. Now imagine if there were a million Geiger counters in the box, each pointed at their own piece of radioactive material. It only takes one tick to kill the cat. The overwhelming likelihood is that at least one Geiger counter will register an event.”

Moira chose her words carefully. “Then I suppose the cat dies.”

“Nearly all the time, yes,” Ian said. “But there’ll still be a branch in which it doesn’t. There’ll still be one experiment in which none of those million counters register an event. Just because it’s weird doesn’t mean it won’t happen, in some extreme branch of the multiverse.”

“All right,” Moira said. “If I follow you, then you’ve collapsed one chain of events into a single massively unlikely outcome. How does that change things?”

“It changes things because there’s no limit to how far I can take that process. Everything that ever happens is a series of quantum events. Every process in every cell in your body – every chemical reaction – it all boils down to quantum probabilities in the end. And no matter how complex the macroscopic event, there’ll always be a finite probability of it not happening.”

“Give me an example.”

“Life itself,” Ian said. He seemed to have calmed down

a little now. "Think about it, Moira. Think about your body: every cell in it working to sustain the on-going momentum of living. Molecules being shuffled around, crossing membranes, interacting with other molecules... all of it riding on quantum processes. The avalanche is unstoppable. But there's still a tiny probability – cosmically rare, I admit – that every single one of those processes will suddenly swerve in the wrong direction for the continuation of life. It'd be like a room full of clocks suddenly stopping ticking. Unlikely, but – given a multiverse of possibilities – it could and *must* happen, somewhere."

"What if..." Moira said, groping for an objection. As long as she could keep Ian engaged, he seemed unlikely to do anything regrettable. "What if the multiverse isn't big enough to contain all those possibilities? What if some events are just too rare for consideration?"

"It doesn't have to be that extreme, of course. Not every quantum process has to go wrong. Just some of them. Enough to kill you."

"Still pretty unlikely."

"But vastly *more* likely, if you take that view."

"Now you're frightening me."

"Then consider the more benign alternative. You're very old, lying in your death-bed after a long and happy life. You're about to die of natural causes."

"All right," Moira allowed.

"But what does that mean, exactly? What is death if it isn't just a series of chemical processes coming to an end?"

"Pretty bleak way of looking at it."

"On the contrary," Ian told her. "Think of those chemical processes grinding to a halt. Underlying them, of course, are yet more quantum interactions. That's all anything is. And if it's possible to think of those processes coming to a halt, then it's also possible to consider them being minutely prolonged."

"So one of me gets another minute of life?"

"More than that, Moira. One of you gets immortality. One of you never ever dies. Death is a chemical threshold. There'll always be one of you that can't quite cross it. Some flicker of life keeps sustaining you. You'll be slipping into ever remoter branches of the multiverse with each breath, but from your point of view – what does it matter? You don't perceive all those earlier versions of yourself dying away. You just feel yourself persisting."

"That doesn't sound like any kind of immortality I'd choose for myself," Moira said. "To me it sounds more like a kind of hell. Always drawing the last breath, but never, ever quite getting there. I think I'd rather throw myself under a bus, than face the prospect of *that*."

Ian smiled again. "You're forgetting that no outcome is disallowed, no matter how improbable. An engine drops off a passing plane and smashes the bus to pieces. A hole opens in the road and swallows it. The bus just spontaneously disintegrates: every single weld failing catastrophically at the same moment. A freak whirlwind lifts you out of harm's way."

"That sounds more like a miracle."

"That's exactly what it would look like. You'd know, though: you'd realize that all that had happened is that

you found the nearest non-fatal branch."

Moira could see where this was heading. "A gun, then," she said, speaking the words with a kind of dull inevitability. "I'll put a gun to my head and pull the trigger."

"Won't work either. It will mis-fire. Consistently so, until you point it away from your head, or at an angle which won't prove fatal."

"But what about the people watching me do it? Most of them will see me blow my head off. Not much immortality as far as they're concerned. They're not going to believe, are they?"

"Not until they try it for themselves."

"We all have to put a gun against our heads, is that it? Squeeze the trigger, and if we survive – if the gun mis-fires – then we conclude that we're immortal?"

Ian leaned forward. She could see the alloy gleam of the gun, the tip of the handle jutting from his pocket. So near – so tempting to try and grab it. But the very thought of trying made her feel sick with fear.

"Look back on your own life," he said. "Was there never a time when you came through something – an accident, or a frightening moment – and thought you were lucky not to have been killed?"

Moira shook her head, but not with complete conviction. "I can't think of anything specific."

"Why did you give up parachuting, Moira?"

"I didn't give it up," she said. "I just lost interest. I was never mad on it to begin with. There was just this bloke I happened to fancy at the time – you remember Mick, don't you?"

"I remember Mick. But I also remember why you stopped jumping. It was the day you snagged your rip-cord on the door handle, walking through the canteen doorway. Unfortunately the chute didn't open. It hadn't been packed properly. And if you hadn't snagged it on the doorway, you'd never have found out until you were already falling."

"I'd have had the reserve chute."

"But when they examined your reserve chute, they also found that it hadn't been packed properly. Mick's ex-girlfriend still showed up at the club now and then, didn't she? No one was going to swear that it wouldn't have opened, and no one was going to swear that Mick's ex might have had something to do with it. But that was the last time anyone saw you at the club. I know, Moira. I was sorry to see you go."

"We kept in touch."

"There was a bit of a gap before we hooked up again. Face it: it spooked you. You kept thinking back to that door handle, and wondering what would have happened if you hadn't nipped back into the canteen for those cigarettes."

"We'll never know," Moira said.

"We can guess, though. The vast majority of you died, or were maimed. Some small minority of you survived. Some of you just decided not to jump that day. Some of you went back into the canteen and had the good fortune to snag that handle. Some of you did jump anyway, and even though the equipment was sabotaged you still came safely down to Earth. Some of you don't even know how



lucky you are."

"All right," Moira said. "So sometimes we come through the odd scrape, when things could have been much worse. But that doesn't..."

"It works on a planetary level, too," Ian said.

"I'm sorry?"

"Have you ever realized how many times we've come *this* close to World War Three? The number of times when the button's almost been pushed? Not just during international flare-ups, but all the other times: when someone mistakes the moon for a salvo of incoming ICBMs; when a flock of geese or a meteor shower almost trigger Armageddon? It's terrifying, Moira! It keeps happening, over and over again! We've no right to have made it this far! It's already a bloody miracle that we made it out of the 20th century, and yet it *keeps on happening*. Forget putting a gun to your head; just check your history. We've already proven it works. We're already on an extremely unlikely branch of the multiverse, whether we like it or not."

"But we're not immortal," Moira said. "The people around us keep dying. Doesn't that prove..."

"Of course they keep dying. From your perspective. But from their own perspective? Nobody you ever knew has ever died. They just see everyone else dying around them."

"Then that's our fate, is it? To live forever, but to have everyone we ever loved die, slipping away from us like passing traffic?"

"That's why I have to know," Ian said. "I never said it was *good* news. Frankly, I'm hoping I blow my brains out. But if I keep pulling this trigger, and the pin keeps failing to fall on the loaded chamber... then I'll know."

"And then?"

"Then I've got a problem. Then we've all got a problem."

Ian removed the gun from his pocket. He spun the chamber: it made a pleasant, well-oiled whirring sound. He pushed the chamber back into the body of the gun and held the weapon to the side of his head. It looked stupid and toylike, unreal amongst the pizza boxes and Ben Elton novels and the smiling pterodactyl. It's now or never, Moira thought. She lurched forward, grasping for the gun across the kitchen table. Her sweater caught on her coffee cup, sending it spilling across the science magazines. Ian jerked back, keeping the barrel tight against his temple.

"Don't..." she said.

Ian pulled the trigger. The hammer clicked down on empty space.

"Once," he said. Then – hardly removing the gun from his head – he spun the chamber again. He pulled the trigger.

"Twice."

He spun the chamber again. Moira pushed back from the table, her sweater sodden with coffee. She stood up, but felt frozen with terror. "Please, Ian..."

Ian had backed himself against the pile of computer boxes. "Don't come any closer, Moira."

"Or what, Ian? Or you'll kill yourself?"

He pulled the trigger again. "Three times."

"Ian, please."

The whir of the chamber, the click of the trigger. "Four times. What do you think are the odds of that, Moira? I think rather a lot of me must have already died."

"Ian, no."

He spun the chamber again, let the hammer fall. "Five times. Getting a bit spooky now, don't you think? We'll do it up to ten. Then I'll make us another cuppa."

He spun the chamber, pulled the trigger.

By the time the police and ambulance had arrived, Moira had finished all the other cigarettes in the packet. She waited in the living room until she saw the blue lights of the emergency vehicles, spectrally beautiful in the early morning snowscape. It was still dark. When they knocked, she could barely bring herself to walk through the kitchen to open the door.

The police man looked at Ian, swore softly. Behind him, the paramedic slowed his approach perceptibly. She had told them on the phone that Ian was dead; that there could be no doubt about it, but they had rushed here all the same. She was grateful for that: all she wanted to do was get as far away from Ian's cottage as possible.

As far away from Ian.

The police man took her into the living room. He was about 45, with a beer belly and mutton-chop sideboards: she imagine him playing in a country-and-western band on weekends.

"Can you talk, love?"

"I told you what happened on the phone." She smoked, having cadged another cigarette from one of the police.

"It wasn't me. I just need to know roughly what happened: we can deal with a proper statement later."

Moira looked back through the door into the kitchen. She could just see the back of Ian's chair, with Ian's left shoulder poking into view. She could hear soft, attentive voices. It was easy to imagine that Ian was being spoken to as well.

"Ian called me," she said. "We were old friends. He sounded a bit funny, so I decided it was worth driving over."

"Bit funny in what way?"

"He kept talking about not killing himself."

"Not killing himself?"

"I wasn't going to split hairs. I knew something was up. I just wish I'd called someone else first, so that I didn't come here on my own."

"If it's any consolation, I doubt that we'd have got here any sooner. Not on a night like this." He nodded back towards the paramedics in the other room. "Those lads are on a double shift as it is."

"I should still have tried."

"What happened when you got here?"

"Ian had me sitting down at the table in the kitchen. Then he started telling me stuff – stuff that was obviously very important to him – about how he'd worked out that he was going to live forever. Then he showed me the gun."

"He had it on him?"

Moira shook her head. "It was on the table, hidden. But I didn't have time to grab it. Ian slipped into his pocket. He was sitting on the other side of the table, so there was no way I could have made a grab for it. Not

without risking it going off, anyway.”

“You were right not to try. Did he stop you phoning for help?”

“He said the phone was cut off.”

“And?”

“It wasn’t. He hadn’t even unplugged it. I just assumed he had. He was a clever sod, Ian. He always knew how to get the maximum effect with the minimum effort.” She hated the way that sounded, but it was true enough.

“And he kept talking?”

“Until he pulled out the gun again. I still didn’t have time to do anything about it. I would have, believe me. But he had it against his head...”

“It’s all right, Miss Curbishley. That’ll do for now. In case you’re wondering, I see no reason to consider you a suspect. Ian wasn’t unknown to us: we knew he had a history of ups and downs. But you are an important witness, and I’m afraid we’ll need a detailed statement. Tonight being tonight, however...” He shrugged. “I think it can wait until the weather improves, and we’ve all had a good night’s sleep. Is that your Volvo outside?”

“Yes,” Moira said.

“Give me the keys and I’ll have one of the boys drive you home. Do you have a friend you can stay with tonight, someone you can talk to?”

“I’ll be all right,” Moira said.

“All the same...”

“I can drive myself,” she said. “You’re going to be here for a while, aren’t you? I don’t think I want to wait. It’s not snowing at the moment.”

“I’d much rather you let one of us drive you.”

“It’s kind, but I’d rather go now. I’m coping, honestly.”

The police man made sure he had her contact details, then handed her his card. “Give us a call in the morning, all right? We’ll get it all sorted out before lunch. I’m not saying it’s going to be easy, but at least you can start moving on.”

Moira took the card. “Thank you.”

She walked through the kitchen, keeping her attention fixed on the door. Outside, it was bitterly cold: the stars had come out, cold and clear and perfectly still above the little Nativity Scene of parked vehicles. Moira closed the door behind her, trudged to her Volvo, exactly as if she had just said goodbye to Ian after a nice chat over the kitchen table.

She froze. The thought occurred to her: if Ian was right, then – somewhere out in the infinite sprawl of the ever-expanding multiverse – there was a version of herself doing just that. Another Moira, trudging to her Volvo. A Moira who had just seen the gun fail to kill Ian ten or twenty times, and was still feeling the consequences of that observation slide into place. That there was no death; that there was no mortality. That nothing ever died, and that it was the worse thing imaginable.

Would *that* Moira believe, she wondered?

Did she?

Moira got into the Volvo. She wound down the driver’s side window before she set off, anxious for some fresh air, no matter how cold. Thankfully, the engine started first

time. The headlights threw purple shadows across the snow as she backed out between the police vehicles and the ambulance. She slipped into first gear and crunched slowly down the drive, leaving the cottage behind her. She avoided looking in the rear view mirror: she did not think she could take it.

She reached the end of the drive and turned onto the lane. The driving was easier now, and she slipped through the gears into third. Dry branches whisked against the side of the Volvo as she negotiated tight spots. There, ahead, was the humpbacked bridge. Once she had crossed it, there would only be a little more country lane and then she would hit the main road, which she knew had been gritted earlier that night.

Something flashed out of the night, toward her. She had a photographic flash of a flattened, startled face, framed by soft white feathers. Wings spread, as if pinned wide in an anatomy diagram. Claws grasping toward her.

Moira swerved. The owl slid past, brushing the wind-screen. The car gyred, losing traction. The Volvo slid horizontally, easing off the road, sliding toward the banks of the river. The moment stretched: time oozing uselessly. Moira tried to steer the car back towards the road, but her hands moved in slow-motion on the wheel. Moira saw the nearly frozen river: a shallow ribbon of ice, dotted with the grey-black shadows of pebbles. She felt an instant of relief. She was not going to drown. Even if the car smashed through the ice; even if there was running water under that ice, it couldn’t be more than a few inches deep. The car would be a write-off, but...

Then she saw the tree. It was a dead, wizened old thing. It must have been carried downstream during the torrents of the last heavy storm. Now, planted amongst the rocks, it looked as if it had been there for a thousand years.

The car lurched toward it, tipping onto its right-hand side. The tree loomed larger, and with a horrid inevitability, Moira knew that it was going to push those sharp old branches through the open window of the driver’s side door. She had just enough time to let out a tiny, unheard gasp of terror, and then the car rolled onto the tree. The last thing she remembered was the branches – thick as her arm – ramming through the window, the instant as their cruel edges touched her skin.

But when the police found her, not much more than an hour later, they could not believe that she had survived with only minor scratches. All the major branches had gone around her, trapping her in place but doing no real harm.

“You’re a very lucky woman,” the policeman told her.

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**Alastair Reynolds** is an *Interzone* discovery (class of 1990), and he has gone on in recent years to become one of Britain’s most successful science-fiction writers. His latest novel is the massive *Absolution Gap* (Gollancz, 2003). His most recent story in this magazine was “Hideaway” (issue 157), and we are pleased to welcome him back after a three-and-a-half-year break. Although originally from Wales, he lives in the Netherlands.



She knew that there was something wrong with her baby, because Ellie's eyes did not follow her as she moved about the room and she had once been told that this was important. Aud crouched over the baby, passing a hand across Ellie's face.

"Ellie? What's wrong?"

This time, the baby's eyes twitched to follow the passage of her hand and Aud breathed a sigh of relief. Nothing wrong, after all, and probably she was just being silly, but she had been told so often that she did not understand things that once she had taken a fact into her head she clung to it. She thought she understood the baby a little better now and as long as it remained just Ellie and herself, no one else, she thought she could cope. Ellie was doing fine, and if she still seemed to eat so little when Aud gave her the bottle, at least she appeared healthy and well. Aud would surely know if a change occurred; she watched Ellie for hours, noticing every movement, every sound.

Picking Ellie up, Aud stepped carefully over the piles of broken plaster and carried her out onto the little concrete balcony.

"Look," she said. "You can see Big Ben from here. See it? See the big clock? And there's the Houses of Parliament, where all the rich people go." She thought that the distant clock face read ten to eight, or perhaps it was twenty to ten. She could never remember which hand meant which, no matter how often she had been told, and it was so easy to lose track of the time. But Ellie, lying quietly in her arms, would never question her; never ask uncomfortable things like 'what time is it?' and 'what does that say?' and 'what is Parliament?' Maybe when Ellie grew up she would be able to answer these things on her own.

"And then you'll be a help to me, won't you?" Aud said. She and Ellie watched as one of the boats glided down the Thames, just above the water like a big wing, rising as it came to the barrier. Wealthy tourists came on those boats, Aud's mum had told her, to see what was left of London. This puzzled Aud, too: surely you couldn't leave a piece of a city, not like a bit of cabbage that you tried to hide on your plate. When she had asked where the rest of London had gone, her mum said that it was under the water, that it was all to do with the world getting warmer. But to Aud, London always seemed a cold place.

They did not spend a long time looking out of the window, because it was time for Ellie's nap and Aud had to check that the door was locked. She did this many times a day, worrying in case the gangs came. She could hear them at night, running around the bottom of the flats and she was sure that they got into the lift shaft, even though the lift hadn't been working for years. Sometimes, when she went to the food charity or to collect her money, there was a sharp smell in the hallway. It did not smell like anything natural, but as though someone had been burning something. It made Aud nervous and so she did not want to be seen going in and out of the flat. She made sure that the steel door was locked every time. She always tried to take a different way to get her money, too, even though it meant leaving Ellie alone for longer. Sometimes, she got lost, and that was worst of all.

"Where's Highstone Road?" she would ask some passer-

# Loosestrife

*Liz Williams*

by, who always looked as though they had more important places to go. And once someone had snapped, "You're standing in it. Can't you read?"

"No," Aud said, and the man just stared at her before walking away. She felt stupid, then, but it was true. How was she to know how to read, when her mum had never put her in school, keeping her up night after night for company. Later, when she had signed on with the Deserving Poor board, they had tried to teach her, but it was only a short course and the letters just hadn't seemed to stick. She couldn't tell half of them apart, no matter how hard she tried.

"You can't help it," Danny had told her, when she said that she wasn't going back. "You're just a bit thick, that's all. Nothing wrong with that."

"I know," Aud said sadly, but there wasn't anything either of them could do about it. And Danny seemed to know this, too, because he helped her so much: taking the Council seal off the flat and turning the steel slab into a proper door that you could lock, and bringing her veg from the allotments. Sometimes, now that he was back from Ireland, he even offered to look after Ellie, but Aud always said no. She thought it was kind of him, but she didn't feel that it was right. Ellie was her daughter, not his. She did not like anyone even to hold Ellie, and she would not let Danny get too close.

"At least now you've got the baby, you'll get more money," Danny said. "And you're 18, aren't you? That should qualify you for extra benefits."

"I suppose so." Aud was doubtful.

"Oh, come on. You're Deserving Poor, they had you checked, didn't they? Not like me," and Danny laughed, sitting in the ragged-sleeved sweater, head shaved and the code clearly visible just above the nape of his neck. "Undeserving, that's what they said I was. Not that I expected anything else, mind. You're lucky you're not too bright, really."

His gaze fell on Ellie and Aud could tell that he was wondering about the baby again. She had not told him anything about Ellie; it had never seemed the right time, somehow.

He said, hesitantly, "Aud – who's her dad? Not that I've any right to ask, mind. Just wondering. I know she's not mine – well, obviously she isn't. But you don't go out much, and if someone's been bothering you – I'd have put off going to Ireland, if I'd known."

"Just someone," Aud had said. "No one you know."

"Come on, Aud. You don't know anyone except me and Gill and the lot down the Social."

"It was someone I met, all right? Just the once." And that was all she was saying, Aud thought. She clammed up and wouldn't look at him, and after a bit more coaxing he gave up and let it rest. But she didn't want to lie to Danny, and she couldn't tell him about Ellie. Not yet.

Now, she hurried down the stairwell, trying not to stumble over the piles of rubbish that had blown in through the open doors. When she reached the bottom of the stairs she paused and looked around her. The courtyard was empty apart from a few boys and a dog. Aud liked dogs, but not kids: sometimes they shouted things and she did not always understand what they said. It was never nice, she could tell that. But the boys ignored her and so she slipped between the blocks of flats and took the path that led down along the run-off canal. There was a lock at the top, Danny had told her, which opened if the river got too full and let the water out. Aud wondered where it went; she pictured it running dark and secret under the streets. It was a comforting thought. She passed the old railway bridge which crossed the run-off: it was pretty in summer, with loosestrife and nettles and long grass. She had come here with Danny, before he went to Ireland, and he'd told her which flower was which. Because it was Danny who told her, she had remembered. Now, the plants had died back and there was only bare earth beneath the bridge, but she still liked it.

She counted the paving stones as she walked, careful not to tread on the cracks. It was only a game, she knew; she had played it as a kid, but somewhere along the line it had turned serious, started to be important. She thought it had been when Ellie had come: the world became a different place, when you had a child. You became larger and smaller at the same time. But she was doing better than her mum, she knew that: letting Ellie sleep at night, not waking her up whenever she felt lonely or bored, not shouting at her. All the time: Tell me

you love me; tell me you love me. You shouldn't have to ask that of a child. It should come naturally, but her mum had never been able to let it rest. The Social had been round a few times and Aud had kept quiet. Her mum knew what they wanted to hear, she didn't tell them anything that mattered and so Aud had stayed, the days not-quite-real, the nights sleepless. She did not know why her mother didn't sleep like normal people; she'd always been that way, her mum had said. After the visit by the Social, she had overheard her mum talking to Auntie Julie.

"I don't know why you bother," Julie said. "You could have sold her off – there's plenty of them that want one, even if you don't. Even if she's a bit defective. People can't afford to be choosy these days."

"I've been bossed around all my life," her mum had said, hot and angry. "I just want something I can boss around, now."

"You're lucky you could have a kid," Julie said. "Lots of 'em can't. Something in the water, my dad said, or genetic modifications, or mad cows. If you ever want to get rid of Aud, you let me know. I know a bloke down the market."

"I don't like the idea, all the same," Aud's mum had muttered. "What if he sold her to some pervert? Plenty of those around, too. Look at my old man. 'Keep it in the family,' he used to say. I'd only sell her, Jule, if she went to a good home. And even then – I don't know. We're all right as we are."

And now Aud was lucky, too, for she had Ellie and lots of richer people couldn't have babies. She thought of this as she walked along the canal path, and she felt her luck running alongside her, like a dog. She found the DP office without too much trouble, this week.

"Fifty-three euros; here you are. Is it all right like that? Want me to put it in the envelope for you?" The woman at the DP was kind, Aud thought. They weren't all like that: the one on the end always looked at her as though she was in the wrong office, as though she ought to be registered at the Undeserving side and have no money at all, just what she could scrounge off the streets on a beggars' license. She plucked up her courage and asked.

"Scuse me," she said. She'd wanted to know about this ever since Danny had got back from Ireland. "Could you tell me, what's the rate if you've got a baby?"

The woman frowned. "They'd have to be sure it was a genuine claim, love. Otherwise you could lose your registry and go onto the other list – they're trying to discourage girls from getting pregnant to raise their rate. Because so many babies die, you see, or don't come to term, and a lot of girls think they can fake it – get a false certificate. It's not fair, but that's the way things are, these days." She gave Aud a sharp, sudden look. "You're not pregnant, are you?"

"No," Aud said, suddenly afraid. "It's for someone else. A friend asked me."

"Well, if you have a baby, and they let you keep it, you'd get a hundred euros a week, and some of the charities give maternity benefits, but you'd need to go to them for that."



"Thanks," Aud said. She bundled the money into her purse and went out, quickly. She had not told the DP about Ellie. As far as she knew, only Danny knew about the baby and that was the way Aud wanted things to stay.

It was cold out now. Aud's fingers curled inside the thin gloves as she tried to remember what month it was. November, perhaps, but it was hard to tell because they put the Christmas stuff up so early in the shops. It cheered her up, thinking about Ellie and what to get her for Christmas. It would be Ellie's first.

She was walking through the posh bit now, the little knot of streets they called the Village. Aud liked it here, but she felt out of place, as though at any moment someone might come up to her and ask her to leave for making the place look untidy. There was a group of girls clustered on the corner, dressed in coats with big fur collars and cuffs, high heels. Their perfume drifted through the air; they smelled expensive. They were gathered around a pram, cooing into it. Aud could not help looking. The baby looked exactly like Ellie, except its eyes were blue.

"He's so gorgeous," one of the girls was saying. "You're so lucky."

The girl holding the pram gave a small, smug smile. "I wanted a boy, but they're a bit more difficult than girls."

"When did you get him?"

The girl holding the pram turned and caught sight of Aud and her face grew thinner, as if she didn't want a scruffy person near her baby. Aud felt herself grow hot with embarrassment and she hurried away. To cheer herself up, she started thinking about Christmas again and she kept it up all the way back to the flat, but when she got there, she saw that there was a van outside.

It wasn't like the drugs van, which came every week. It was white, with a logo on the side. Aud could not read what it said, but she thought that the letters were a D and a P: perhaps two Ds, or two Ps. The windows were frosted over; she would not, in any case, have tried to look inside. She wasn't that stupid. She skirted the van and made her way up the stairs. There was no sign of anyone in the stairwell. Once the door was shut behind her, she felt safer. Ellie was asleep on the blanket. Aud waited, listening. Someone knocked. Aud froze. Then, with relief, she heard Danny say, "Who are you looking for?"

"Do you live here?" A woman's voice, which Aud did not recognize.

"No."

"Do you know who does?"

"I came up to see one of my mates. It's not his place – he's staying with somebody. I don't know what their name is."

"You do know that this block's been condemned?"

A pause, then Danny said, "Yeah, so what? Where are people supposed to live if they haven't got any money?"

"Does your friend have a girlfriend?"

"Why don't you ask him?"

Aud found herself moving to the bed, stealthily, so that her feet would make no sound on the concrete floor. She picked Ellie up, willing her to be quiet.

"We'd like to have a word, because someone heard a

baby crying up here yesterday."

"Someone wasn't minding their own business, then."

"It's no place for a young child. We just want to help."

The woman sounded kind, Aud thought, and she was being very patient with Danny. But they always did sound kind. It didn't stop them messing you around.

Ellie was silent, staring up at Aud's face. Aud swallowed hard, then went out to the balcony. Pulling the window shut behind her, she climbed over the partition that divided the balcony from that of the neighbouring flat. She made her way along the row, avoiding the litter and the needles, until she came to the walkway and the stairs that led down. She stopped and looked back. No one was there. She could still see the van parked outside in the courtyard. She hurried down the stairs, clutching Ellie.

"Don't cry, don't cry..." And Ellie did not utter a sound.

The only place she could think of was the railway bridge. She would wait there for a bit, then go back and see if the van had gone. She thought of taking Ellie into the pub, because it would be warmer, but she was afraid of being seen. If she wrapped Ellie up tightly, perhaps it would not be too cold. There was no one about on the canal path and that made her feel safer.

She crouched under the bridge in the damp dimness, watching the boats going back and forth across the narrow glimpse of the Thames. She lost track of the day. It grew cloudy, but did not rain. Ellie slept and Aud grew cold and hungry. She would go back, look for the van – but then a shadow fell across her. Aud looked up and felt filled with relief, because it was Danny.

"They've gone," he said. "You heard them, didn't you?"

"I thought they'd take her away."

"Probably would have done, too." He squatted on his heels, looking down at the baby in her arms. He said, gently, "What do you want to do, Aud?"

"About what?"

"About the baby."

Aud nearly told him, then, but she clamped her lips shut against the words. She did not want to hear herself say: "I stole her, out of someone else's pram." Because then Danny would surely stop being her friend. Instead, she said something else that was the truth.

"I want to take her away. It's not right, bringing her up in London, in that flat. I try to make it as nice as I can, but –"

"– but it's a dump."

"Yeah, and I can't get anywhere else."

"You're not claiming money for her?"

"No. I haven't told them about her."

She waited for him to ask "Why not?" and it occurred to her then that perhaps he knew, or at least suspected, that Ellie was a stolen child. But he only said, "Okay. Listen, Aud. If you're really serious about leaving, then I can help you. Give you some cash and put you on the boat to Ireland. I've got friends there, the ones I told you about."

"The ones in the farmhouse?"

"It might be a squat, Aud, but it's a nice place. A good place for a kid to grow up in. And I think they'd look after

you. They don't like the Deserving Poor business – that's why they left England. And things are a bit easier over there. People help each other out."

"Okay," Aud whispered, and her heart beat fast at the thought of the boat, the sea silver in the cold light, a green place at the end of it. She added, "You're really good to me," and embarrassed, he looked away.

The thought of travelling alone scared her, but in the end, she didn't have to. Danny went with her. His dad was sick, he said, and he might as well see the old man before he died.

"But you've only just got back," Aud said.

"It doesn't matter. You know me, back and forth, to and fro. Don't like to stay too long in one place."

But she wondered why she felt guilty, all the same.

They left at the end of the week. Aud tried to give him some money, and at last he took a bit of it for the bus. She sat with her face pressed to the chilly window, looking out at the motorway. They left London behind, and soon there was nothing but flooded fields and the barbed wire enclaves of the shires, where the rich people lived. Once they saw an armoured car, crossing the great bridge into the Republic of Wales. Aud, frozen with nerves, had to show her DP documents, but they let her through without saying anything. Ellie dozed until they got to the ferry and then she woke up, crying a little.

"Does she need feeding?" Danny asked, frowning.

"I don't think so."

"She doesn't seem to want her bottle much, does she? I thought babies were all 'in one end, out the other'. Maybe she needs changing."

"I changed her in the service station," Aud lied. "She had her bottle then."

"Oh, right." And to her relief, Danny lost interest.

She spent as much time as she could on the deck, watching the gulls and the waves with silent delight. The rocky Welsh coast was soon gone. Aud leaned against the rail, Ellie held tightly in her arms.

"Mind you don't get cold," Danny said. Before she could stop him, he reached out and drew Ellie's blanket aside to tuck it in more securely.

"This trip is the first time I've really seen her in daylight," he said, smiling. Aud closed her eyes, too tightly; she did not want to see his face change. There was a long moment of silence, shattered by a baby's cry. Aud's eyes snapped open, but it was only a gull, wheeling over head.

She felt him take the baby from her and this time, she let him. Ellie made no protest at all.

After a long time, he said, "Jesus, Aud. Where did you get her?"

Aud did not answer, but he did not sound angry, only bewildered and it gave her a little hope.

"Did you nick her out of someone's car, or what?"

"Her name's Ellie," Aud whispered.

Danny handed Ellie back to her, carefully, and stood with his feet braced, staring out to sea.

"Need a cig," he murmured. She watched him roll up in silence, waiting for him to say something. His hands looked cold. He fumbled with the papers, with the tobacco, with

the lighter. Then, after a long breath, he said, "Shouldn't be too long, now. Look. That's Wexford, over there."

His friends lived in the countryside near Cork, and when Ellie saw the place she thought it was the most beautiful house she had ever seen, even if half of it was a ruin. A lot of Danny's friends seemed to live in vans, anyway, so the state of the house didn't really matter. A girl called Jade, with a mat of beaded hair and a big smile, took Aud under her wing and showed her to a warm room with a fire.

"You can crash in here. This'll be your space, and the baby's."

She brought Aud a bowl of stew and once Aud had eaten it, the journey seemed to tumble down on her, all at once. She yawned. She thought she would just sit down for a moment, but when she next looked up, it was nearly dark outside. Jade was sitting with Ellie in her arms.

"It's all right, Aud," she said. "Everything's all right."

So Aud went back to sleep. She woke later, and there were voices outside the warm room: Danny and Jade.

"Her name's Ellie, right?" Jade was saying.

"Yeah." Danny gave a tight laugh. "Well, that's what it says on the back of her neck."

"She's amazing. I thought she was a real baby."

"So did I, until halfway across the bloody Irish Sea. When the Social came round, I realized Aud'd nicked her, and I knew what would happen. I thought: just get her to Ireland, with the kid, whether it's hers or not."

"You didn't stop to think about her mum?" Jade said, angrily, and Aud cringed.

"Of course I did! I knew it wasn't right, Jade, but Aud's never had a thing of her own and so I thought: just give her a chance. And then, on the boat, I realized. Huge weight off my mind."

"But Ellie's not plastic, is she? She feels real. Like flesh. And she looks at you, and cries – she even seems to pee and eat, but not as much as a real baby."

"She is flesh, Jade. They grow them, in tanks. They're for rich girls who can't have kids – it's some kind of psychological charity initiative. They cost a fortune. But they don't grow up. They're not much more than a toy, really."

I am dreaming, Aud told herself. I don't want to listen any more. She pulled the blanket over her ears, and huddled back against the wall. In the firelight, Ellie watched her with round dark eyes and did not blink even when Jade came back through the door.

"Shhh," she said, when she saw that Aud was awake. She gave Aud a long measuring look, as though she wanted to say something else. But then she added, "I'll be quiet, okay? I don't want to disturb the baby." And reassured, Aud closed her eyes and slept.

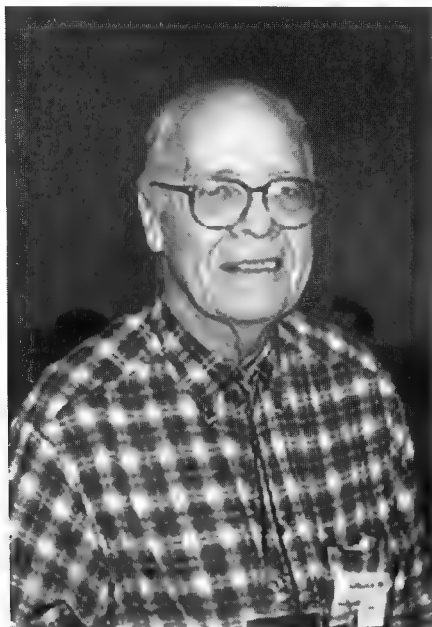
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**Liz Williams** has published several well-received novels since her debut book, *The Ghost Sister* (2001). Her many stories in *Interzone* include "Adventures in the Ghost Trade" (#154), "The Blood Thieves" (#160), "Mr Animation and the Wu Zhiang Zombies" (#168) and "Sharecropper" (#175). She lives in Brighton but has travelled widely, particularly in central Asia.



# Reasonable Engineering Laws

**Hal Clement**  
interviewed by  
Darrell Schweitzer



*Editor: This conversation with the late Harry Clement Stubbs was recorded at Eeriecon, Niagara Falls, New York, in April 2001, and is hitherto unpublished. We run it here as a tribute to the well-loved author who wrote as "Hal Clement," and who died on 29th October 2003.*

*Schweitzer: Let's start with a bit of background and how you began writing.*

Clement: I started trying to write in the 1930s. I had a Canadian cousin. I used to spend all the summers on the farm with him and his family. We got interested in science fiction and reached that age where we were beginning to learn a little bit. Sometimes there were errors in the stories we read, rather egregious ones. We both felt, well, really, we were teenagers, and we knew enough not to make errors of this sort, and we began trying this. I was 17. He was a little bit younger. We both wrote a story, in pencil. Nothing beyond that ever happened. That was the last year that I saw him, actually. We left the farm on September 1st, 1939, the day the Panzers went into Poland, and he was killed in the Canadian army a few years later in Italy. So that was it.

I tried again in the summer I was 18. That was also done in pencil. My mother typed it. She went on strike

thereafter. Never again. I would have to get my own typewriter, or at least use hers.

I sent the story in to John Campbell, and got one of the famous Campbell multi-page rejections, of the encouraging sort. So I tried again the next summer and he took the darned thing. This coming October will be the 60th anniversary of my first sale. Don't ask me what day the letter came. But that was "Proof." It was published in the June 1942 *Astounding* – and it was called *Astounding* then – and that was it. It and the story written a few months later, and also published in August of 1942 converted my parents. I don't know that either of them ever became a science-fiction fan, but the \$245 those stories collected made quite a dent in Harvard's \$400-a-year tuition. I know this dates me...

*S: It does, but it also means that if you adjust for inflation, you were being paid extremely well.*

C: I never complained about the pay, and I always regarded it as a hobby anyway. I never seriously considered trying to make a living off it. I was a school teacher, and papers had to be corrected first.

*S: When you were first starting to write, who did you look to as examples*

*of how to write good sf? Or did you merely look at the pulp magazines of the middle 1930s and decide you could do better?*

Clement: There were several. Probably my most extreme childhood hero was and still is Jack Williamson. I don't know if he can be called a childhood hero any more, because even I am not exactly in childhood. Jack Williamson, Doc Smith, Sprague de Camp. Who else was working then? I hate to shock anyone, but Neil R. Jones, who doesn't wear well when I read him as an adult. But the others I can still happily re-read.

*S: Did you make a conscious effort to study these writers and how they did it?*

Clement: No. As far as the actual art or science, whichever it is, of writing is concerned, I think that the main thanks go to my parents. They were very, very firm on proper use of the English language. They both were quite annoyed after my sister and I started school and our English usage deteriorated. Not enormously, but we got awfully slangy. I have never had much trouble in making myself clear. I occasionally get caught in an ambiguity, but generally speaking, people can understand me.

*S: But somewhere outside of grammar class you have to learn things like point-of-view and how to pace a story, how to make a dramatic scene, and so on.*

Clement: I never really learned those. Either they have come unconsciously, or possibly I don't have them yet. [Laughter from audience.]

*S: Oh, I think you do. This gets to the point of what is the secret to the patented Hal Clement story. You have a distinct method of writing a story that is quite different from anyone else's.*

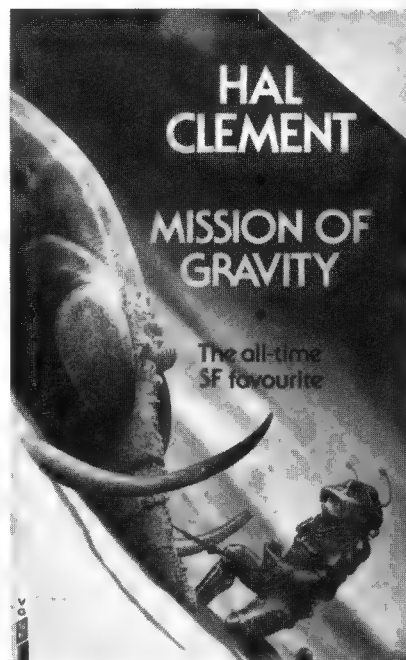
Clement: The idea almost invariably comes from a bit of scientific news. My favourite source is *Astronomy* magazine. The slide talk I will be giving tomorrow goes through some of that. The item was in the May 2000 issue of *Astronomy* in their news column. The basic idea was seeing what the stellar system being reported was actually like, trying to find out as much as I could about it from friends who are on the Internet, doing some calculating: what planets might there be here at all? Would they be hot, cold, a short year, a long year? You name it. At this point I have a modest-sized collection of possible planets in the system. I haven't started to write a story about it yet because there is another one on the front burner. This is the general way. The idea comes from science. I have never been able to outline a story and stay with the outline, however. By the time I am 20 or 30 thousand

words into the script, I am so far from any outline I ever started with or had in my head that it might as well never have been produced.

*S: What I mean is that you've been described as starting a story "from the gravity up." Most writers start with a scene or an idea or an image, or maybe a line or two, but you seem to begin a story with mathematics and data. How do you get from an interesting astronomical object to a story with people in it?*

Clement: It is mostly calculation at first. As I build the planet or planetary system as the case may be, I think of the things that might happen in it because of the odd nature of its environment. Every time a possible event occurs to me, it goes down on a 3-by-5 card. Eventually the stack of cards tends to be quite high. I don't have a table like this twelve-footer before us in the house, so I use the living room floor. But I start going through the cards. They're never in any particular order. Even in the beginning they're only in the order that the thoughts occurred to me. Right, here's something. This could happen. I put the card in the middle of the floor. This may fit into it, but it had to happen first, so the card goes a little over to the left. And, Oh here's a bit with an ending line. So, way over to the right. And so on. Eventually all the cards are in a reasonable chronological line on the floor and there's the story. It's much easier than this "plotting" stuff the English teachers used to tell me about.

*S: Did you learn any of this from John Campbell? He surely influenced a lot of his writers on how they approach ideas and what they do with them.*



Clement: I got ideas from him, quite frankly. Generally he either didn't explain them to me or I didn't grasp the explanations of just what I should do with the darn things. The idea was there. This made certain events possible. While I didn't develop the 3-by-5 card technique that early, it amounted to the same thing. I had a flock of things that could happen, and I began writing.

*S: So, where did the idea for Mission of Gravity come from and how did that develop?*

Clement: *Mission of Gravity* was one of my own. John did not suggest it. It had been cooking very slowly on a back burner for several years, actually. I first remember saying something about it to a college crowd I was talking to, and that must have been in the late 1930s or early 1940s.

We read stories about very heavy-gravity planets and very light-gravity planets, and spaceship adventures where there was no weight at all – but don't let me hear anyone say there's no gravity – and I had never really thought, until somewhere in the '30s, I guess, about a planet which had notably different gravity in different parts. The Earth does. Any rotating planet does. But your weight at the North Pole of the Earth is not noticeably and significantly different than at the Equator. Measurably, yes.

But I just tried to make the whole thing extreme. I'm a very conservative type, actually. I don't like things like gravity-screens because I haven't the faintest idea of how they could work. Strictly speaking, of course, I am inconsistent and hypocritical, because I haven't the faintest idea how a faster-than-light drive would work either. But I faced the fact quite early in my writing that there was no place in the Solar System except Earth and not very much of that, in which the hero could rescue his heroine in shirt-sleeves.

I had to move out of the Solar System quite early on, and I never did come up with a really convincing method of faster-than-light travel. If I did I suppose I'd try to patent it. There we are. I prefer other systems because I can make up my own planets, and, boy, can you do funny things to the environment without too drastic changes in the planet. It can be a perfectly plausible planet, and boy, the weird things that can happen.

*S: Don't you feel that you can also do that with our own Solar System, particularly as it keeps getting revised?*

Clement: Oh, yes, and I have written things set in this solar system. But I have not had heroes rescuing heroines without wearing environment armour



of some sort. And I don't usually bother to have heroes rescuing heroines. Nowadays you can't get away with it. The heroines, if anything, are supposed to be doing the rescuing.

*S: But in Mission of Gravity they're trying to retrieve a valuable object.*  
Clement: Yes. The motivation has always been my own. I like science. I majored in science. I think that most of our problems, if they're going to get solved at all, are going to be solved by science, and I just like stories that work that way. Also, you don't, usually, in a story of this sort worry about the villains being obviously French or obviously Asiatic or obviously Black or obviously female, and getting nasty letters. The indifferent universe makes for a perfectly adequate villain.

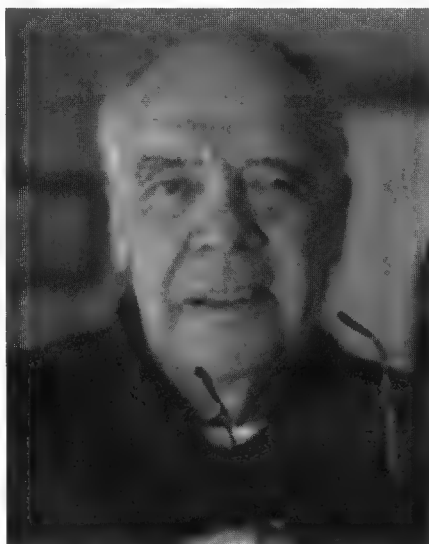
*S: Then again, you have a very different story in Needle, which is one that didn't start from building a planet.*  
Clement: This is quite true. I had it happen right here on Earth. I think that originated from my nasty tendency, whenever I hear someone say "Of course," or imply "Of course," I start wondering what would happen or what could happen if that particular "Of course" weren't true.

The "of course" in this case came from an article by the late Sprague de Camp, called "Design for Life." It ran as a two-parter in *Astounding* somewhere in the 1940s. He came up with a whole flock of reasons why an intelligent being should be pretty much humanoid, such as having its major sense organs as close as possible to the major nerve centre to make quick reflexes possible; the advantage of being able to stand upright, look over the grass, and duck down if you had to. He had a lot of points there. He had restrictions on size. It shouldn't be much less than about 40 pounds because if it were it wouldn't have a complex enough structure to have real human intelligence. It shouldn't probably be bigger than, say, a kodiak bear, for comparable reasons of co-ordination.

I'm afraid I was trying to make a liar of him when I invented my virus-sized cells which made up the Hunter.

*S: That is one of the great strengths of science fiction, that you can always take what someone else takes for granted and stand it on end.*

Clement: That's the idea, yes. Every time I am giving a talk at a convention, I try to remember in the course of events to tell everyone who is listening that if they get any story ideas from anything I've said, the ideas are theirs. They'd better go write them. I couldn't copyright a basic idea even if I wanted to, although I gather it has been tried. I don't want to!



*S: Also, if we gave an idea out to everyone in this room and they all wrote them, the stories would all be different.*  
Clement: That's a safe bet, yes. So I have never worried about that aspect of it.

*S: I think this comes back to what I'd call the Hal Clement method. If anybody else did take one of your ideas and write it, they would not produce a Hal Clement story. You have a recognizable method.*

Clement: Yes, and I suspect that the author would be recognizable from whatever he or she did, at least to people who knew him or her well.

*S: For example, the other night I picked one of your stories at random, and read a story called "Dust Rag." It's a story about two explorers who get into trouble on the Moon because, due to the difference in the electrical charges between their spacesuits and their faceplates, magnetic dust adheres*

*to the faceplates, blinding them. So they have to figure out how to change the charge so the dust will fall off. I can't think of anyone who would write a story quite like that. My sense of the archetypal Hal Clement story is that it tells us that science happens all the time, not just in the laboratory.*

Clement: Science, as an industry, if you want to think of it that way, is an attempt to find out what the rules are. It is based, obviously, on the assumption that there are rules. And the more of them you can bring in, the more fun it is, especially if they're ones that everyone knows about, but never thinks about using for problem-solving.

*S: The only actual assumptions behind all this that is taken on faith are that the universe is knowable and the senses report useful information.*

Clement: Yes, I believe that as firmly as I can believe anything. I am not absolutely sure that we are not living in a whimsical universe run by one or more beings not subject to law as we understand it, but the notion offers no real opportunity to think, as far as I am concerned. It is much better, and more comfortable incidentally, to believe that there are laws.

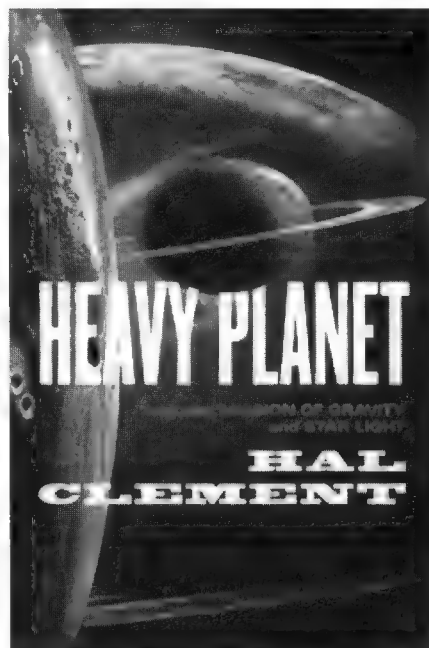
*S: So I guess you wouldn't ever actually write a fantasy.*

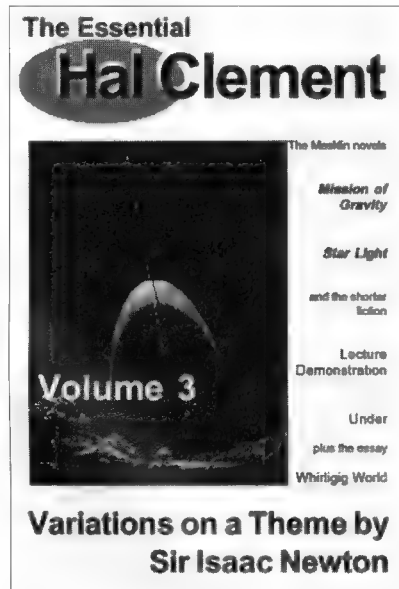
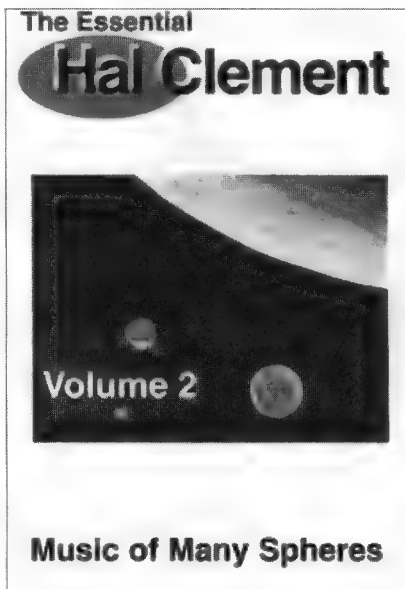
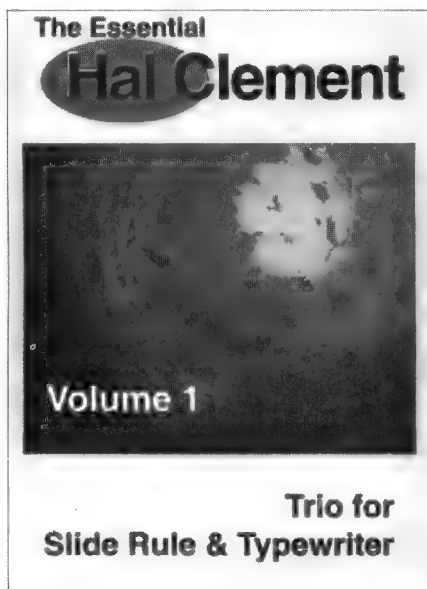
[Laughter from audience.]

Clement: I'm not sure about that. When I was a teenager, I was very stuffy about that sort of thing. I wanted science fiction to be as hard as it could get, and I couldn't bring myself to read a fantasy. I have softened over the years, very considerably. I have read Terry Pratchett's *Feet of Clay*, I think, 23 times, and got fun out of it each time. I am a Discworld junkie. But whether I could write a fantasy is an entirely different matter. I was asked to once. Somebody was proposing a vampire anthology, and I had read *Dracula*, so I figured I knew all that had to be known about vampires. [Laughs.] Well, Stoker did make most of it up.

So I wrote the story, and when it was done it was hard science fiction. My vampire was a retired Roman army surgeon of about the time of Galen, who had the misfortune to sire four haemophiliac sons, of whom one was still alive at the time of the story. He got his unpopular reputation with the neighbours by his attempts to solve the problem of blood transfusions a couple thousand years before we knew enough to have any chance of doing so.

*S: But I suppose you could take a premise which you know is not true and develop it with the same rigour you would use in your science fiction.*





For, example, the one I'd like to see you do would be a story set in a universe in which astrology works, then worked out to its logical conclusion with your usual rigour. The result would be very entertaining and very strange.

Clement: Yes, if I retained my sanity during the operation. [Laughter from audience.] I am willing to consider it, but it is certainly not on the front burner at the moment. The story that's being done is as real as I can imagine, even if it's a rather weird place.

S: Can you talk about this story you're writing?

Clement: I don't mind. The world involved is okay, anyway. It's a water-world. I know, people have made movies about water-worlds... [laughter from audience] but none of those that I have seen or read about consist of a planet whose radius is about 15 percent greater than Earth's, whose density is low enough so that that surface gravity is about one-third that of the Earth, and the reason is that the ocean – and I do mean ocean – is about 2,800 kilometres deep. Now when you start figuring out what would happen there... Well, what would the total lack of mountains do to the climate? What would the total lack of disturbing factors in ocean currents do to the distribution of heat? Even your mistakes you can sometimes turn to use. I was going to have a few floating islands of pumice. The point where the ocean does meet – there's no real crust there – the mantle is intensely volcanic. In fact, the tentative title for the book is *Noise*. [This novel was eventually published by Tor Books in September 2003 – Editor.] Why shouldn't I have pumice? Well, a rough, and I do mean rough, calculation indicates that the pressure at the bottom of this ocean is about 80,000 atmospheres, and if lava does pop into the water, I refuse to believe that under that pres-

sure we're going to get any steam bubbles to turn the lava into pumice.

S: I should think that the pumice would never get a chance to float to the surface anyway.

Clement: If you could boil some little holes in the pumice and fill them with slightly vaporous water... which you can't do. The things are just going to be scrunched back down by the pressure.

S: No islands... Let's take some questions from the audience.

[Silence.]

Clement: I've snowed them already.

[Laughter from audience.]

Question from audience: The focus of a lot of your stories seems to be the astronomical elements. Why you don't focus on the people as a primary factor?

Clement: I am afraid I focus mostly astronomical and chemical facts. For one thing, I am not a good character writer. I have been watching the human species more or less in detail for over three-quarters of a century and I just don't understand the beings. They don't make particularly much sense. About all the motives I can figure out and sympathize or empathize with are curiosity, self-preservation, and the various appetites that go with the needs for self-preservation and reproduction. I don't do very much with the reproduction motive, I suspect, because I was brought up in a rather Victorian household, but the excuse I use is that I consider sex to be an extremely private matter. If anyone here wants me to write that sort of thing, I'm sorry.

S: You could do alien sex.

Clement: That's been suggested. When I wrote *Mission of Gravity*, I never

gave a thought to how the Mesklinites reproduce. I implied that they were quite long-lived, but that was the closest to anything that might be cultural background for them. Later on, of course, at conventions people asked me questions of that general nature. And I thought about it a little, but never went into it at all deeply. Once or twice I mentioned the existence of marine worms on this planet (Earth), whose technique is to crawl along the bottom of the ocean until they can find some rather firmly anchored spot, hang onto it with their rear legs, keep on crawling with their front ones, and pull themselves in two. It happens, so, okay, but when this came up at an I-Con a few years ago, I suggested that it might be fun to figure out what these beings regard as pornography. [Much laughter from audience.] After the talk, a couple of ladies who had been in the back row came down front and asked me, "How about rubber bands?" [Laughter from audience.]

S: How about those magic acts where they saw a lady in two?

Clement: All right. This implies that they have enough technology to have saws, made of something or other.

S: Your aliens are memorable, though. You've even remarked yourself that the reason they seem alien is that they behave logically.

Clement: That's the conscious difference. If I really want something to seem not quite human, I make it behave reasonably.

S: What would a crazy Mesklinite be like?

Clement: This would depend on at what latitude you found him, I suspect.

Continued on page 31

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# Diva's Bones

*John Meaney*

**R**eactors, formed of polished obsidian, moaned in the cavernous vaults. Supporting pillars of fluted bone stood in the shadows; around them, black flames licked upwards, reaching towards the city above.

Necroflux hummed everywhere. Gelid air slid across my skin like a dead man's touch. (Do they think of this, up above? Not while they have lighting and warmth.) Down here, you can't ignore the facts.

I closed my mind to the whispers. They were strongest in the long aisles between the fusion piles, teasing the awareness. When I reached the wrought-iron stairs I climbed quickly, then caught my breath before entering the antechamber.

A uniformed flunky buzzed the director's office, and beckoned me towards a seat.

"Can I take your overcoat, Lieutenant?"

"I'm fine."

*I don't like it here.*

I forced the feeling aside. Pushing my hands in my suit pockets, I stared up at the black iron dragon on the wall: the glowering seal of the Energy Authority.

The heavy door clicked open, swung inwards. I was halfway into the brightly lit office (checking out the deep-red carpet, the polished carvings from far Zuram) by the

time he rose: lean, with a grey goatee, wearing a suit of heavy tweed. A silver watch-chain winking across his vest.

"Lieutenant O'Connor, is it?"

I nodded. "And you're Malfax Cortindo."

"Good evening." He shook my hand – I caught a whiff of bottled lavender, but his grip was stronger than I expected – and motioned me to an elegant chair. "Your commissioner was a trifle vague about how I might help."

"He said I could ask for technical advice." I hesitated. "Perhaps I should tell you about my case, and you can tell me what occurs to you. In confidence, of course."

"Of course."

There had been four killings this year, in three different countries, involving famous stage performers. In each instance, the authorities spun a story of natural death on stage, which worked because none of the deaths was bloody: micro-calibre bullets in the first two cases, a neurotoxic dart in the more recent.

But journalists were not stupid, and their reports hinted at the truth without ever quite stating it in plain declarative sentences: a kind of muttering between the lines.

"You're investigating a homicide, I presume, lieutenant. Perhaps... a body being stolen?"

I looked at him for a long moment, not trusting him.



But if I provided no information, what use was his advice?

In those four cases, two of the bodies disappeared immediately – one in the confusion as fire swept through the theatre, the other because an ambulance crew of impostors calmly bore the deceased away – and someone stole the third body from the family mausoleum. (Masked men without ID tried to remove the fourth body from its vault, but that time there were armed guards who fired first and no one asked questions.)

“Let’s say, a *potential* homicide.” My job was to make sure it didn’t happen.

“A conspiracy, then. Perhaps a death threat?”

“I – Sort of.” I cleared my throat. “No one’s threatened anything overtly. But we’ve a likely target making an appearance in the near future, based on previous patterns. I’m trying to understand the killers’ motives.”

Director Cortindo fingered his goatee, frowning. Then his face cleared.

“The Diva!” He beamed a delighted smile, startling in these necro-industrial surroundings. “Of course... Maria daLivnova is performing on stage, at the... Brazhinski Theatre, is it? It’s the *Mort d’Arcturi*, and the Diva sings the part of Lady Elena.”

Unsettled, I stared at him.

“You’ve heard the stories, then. About the murders of famous performing artists.”

*But how did you guess?*

I didn’t like the way his intuition leaped so far ahead of my explanation.

“It is my business, in a way,” said Cortindo. And, sober now: “You’d better come with me, Lieutenant. You need to see something.”

In the vault, he removed a polished walnut case. Then he flipped up the brass catches, pulled the lid back, and turned the case towards me.

Grey-white bones, dry-looking on a red silk lining.

“Go ahead,” he said. “Pick one up.”

I bit my lip.

“I’m not sure I – ”

Cortindo’s mouth twisted in an almost-smile.

“You’ll never understand what you’re facing, until you do this.”

Peaceful paradise enveloped me.

I was warm and happy in my abstract dreams: emerald swirling light; golden shapes which drifted and called to me; divine human figures who laughed and played, and sang on a silver shore by waves of liquid cobalt. Music, sublime, brought tears to my...

Something was wrong.

A plot in Paradise?

No.

Something, someone, wanted to tear me away from all that was peaceful, all that was forgiveness, all that was simply love.

“NO!”

Images rippled and tore.

No...

And I hurled myself at the director with hands out-

stretched, going for the throat—

*Die now!*

– but he was too quick for me, snatching back the bones in his gauntlet-covered hands, backstepping and spinning away – *so fast* – then I came to my senses and stood there, chest heaving and panting, drenched with sweat.

Paradise. Fading now.

*What the hell – ?*

“Well done, Lieutenant. Most people take longer to come to their senses.”

I looked down at my empty hands.

At my palms, which had held those grey-white bones.

“I’ve trained since childhood in *pa-kua*,” Director Cortindo added. “It’s a soft martial art, heavy on circular avoidance techniques.”

Squinting at him, I swallowed, and said: “I don’t understand.”

“Otherwise” – with a gentle smile – “I’d have had security guards in here with me. It’s a wrench, when you leave the dream.”

My eyes were watering, my head splitting with a stone-hard migraine.

*A dream?*

The bones induced a dream. A powerful alternative to reality.

“A wrench, you call it. That’s a mild way of putting it.”

If I wasn’t here at the commissioner’s suggestion – read: on his order – I’d be considering other words. Assault on a law officer. Obstruction while in the pursuit of official duties.

“The time” – Cortindo took out his antique silver pocket watch – “is half past three.”

“I don’t – ”

But then I realized what he was saying.

*I arrived at noon.*

The bones’ dreams had held me in their clutch for over three hours.

And I felt like weeping, that Cortindo tore me away so soon.

“He was an artist. Pedro d’Alquazar by name.” Director Cortindo stared down at the bones. “Died in poverty before collectors discovered his talent, his true worth. Now his best pieces are priceless treasures, displayed in several national galleries.”

He closed the walnut case, snapped the catches shut.

“Because he died penniless, d’Alquazar’s body came in with a normal shipment. But one of our thanatocogs sensed his difference, and alerted a team to rescue his corpse.”

I watched him replace the case on a shelf inside the vault – *please don’t* – then step back out and swing the heavy door shut. It shifted the air pressure and my ears felt as if they might pop. I swallowed.

Then we left the vault’s anteroom, climbed the steps into the cavernous main installation, while guards sealed up the iron door behind us.

“I’m still not sure I understand,” I said.

Cortindo waved at the necrofusion piles that reared on

all sides, nearly to the groined ceilings a hundred feet overhead.

"What a waste of artistic bones" – with a tiny shrug – "to be merely fuel for this."

We visited one of the two control rooms, situated half-way up one wall of the cathedral-like space. Technicians in black coats nodded at Cortindo, paid no attention to me as Cortindo gave brief explanations of the various instruments.

"These dials here," he said, "record the flux. You'll see they're calibrated in meganecons per square yard, for convenience."

"Naturally."

He gave me a look. "Over here, we monitor for resonance overload. In life, shadow-particles act as standing waves, changing the microstructure of the bones. We want clean waves averaged out to useful harmonics. Deviations can be dangerous."

I thought of the flux sweeping through the bones, the moaning, fragmented thoughts as necrofusion piles replayed shards of forgotten lives.

Cortindo's voice droned on but I, hands in pockets, wandered over to the window and stared down at the long rows of reactors. My skin prickled, but not from stray radiation.

*So many dead.*

Ten thousand or more incarcerated in each pile.

"If you could build a fusion reactor from a single person's bones," said Cortindo, coming to stand beside me, "you might obtain clarity. But in these jumbled piles stacked to critical mass, what you get is daemonic chaos. The vector sum of a mob's primeval fears."

"And if you poked your head inside a reactor's cladding?"

"Oh, Lieutenant." Cortindo gave a tiny shudder. "You wouldn't want to do that."

Ordinary people – people like you and me – end up as part of the fusion piles, keeping those who live after us warm and happy. If any of our memories survive, replayed, they form nightmarish fragments of a vast daemonic power harnessed for the common good. Nothing more than that.

But for the few, the gifted artistic few, the dreams laid down in their bones are beyond price.

And if you were a certain sort of collector, wouldn't you want to capture those sublime thoughts right now, when you yourself were alive to enjoy them, to be enwrapped in priceless visions?

Cortindo was right.

I needed to see that. Experience the dream.

Before, the motive was a vague, shadowy, theoretical thing: insufficient for the vast expense and risk involved. But now...

*Hell, I understand it now.*

But when it came to the modus operandi and the perpetrators' identity – must there be more than one? – I left the Energy Authority feeling more ignorant than when

I arrived. Vision-remnants whirled in my mind, and that was bad.

*Get control.*

I stepped out onto a dank courtyard upon the surface, where a department car was waiting for me.

"The airport, sir, is that right?"

"Quick as you can."

I slid into the back of the big old cruiser and slammed the door shut. The uniformed officers in front took the hint: the driver gunned the engine, screeched out of the courtyard, and hacked his way through fog-bound streets, running three stop lights in succession.

Someone's horn blared. Cheeky bastard.

*Lucky we're in a hurry.*

We got to the airport on time.

"Good job."

"Sir."

Someone opened the car door.

"There's coffee upstairs waiting for you, Lieutenant. I'm afraid the flight's delayed. Another 20 minutes."

"Thank you, Sergeant."

A chilly breeze was pushing back the fog. I nodded to the men on duty, and went inside.

From the control tower, I watched as paparazzi set up position on the cold tarmac, then stood around with hands in overcoat pockets, breath steaming from beneath their hats, waiting for the photo opportunity.

Finally, it landed, and uniformed groundstaff – already vetted by the officers in place – wheeled the stairs to the forward hatch.

*They won't try here.* I was almost certain of it.

She was first off the flight: descending the steps to a chorus of flashbulbs popping white, while the plane's propellers still revolved.

Officers ringed her, and pushed through to the VIP lounge. I nodded my thanks to the control room staff who had put up with me, and headed off to meet Maria daLivnova, diva extraordinaire, high-profile target and a perfect trophy for certain persons unknown.

*Couldn't you have visited some other city?*

She would be awkward, I was sure, with an artistic temperament having little to do with practical considerations. And when I met her, that turned out to be true, more or less.

*But I couldn't have known...*

I had no idea how stunningly beautiful she would be.

Officers surrounded her, but I did not see them. All that I could focus on was a pair of glistening dark enchanting eyes in an elegant ivory-skinned face. And that gaze, when turned on me, seemed to vibrate like a pure and wonderful perfect note.

But she was not beguiled by me.

"You'll allow me privacy, lieutenant." With ice in her voice: "I require that. Meditation before the performance."

*So beautiful.*

This was a professional interview, and it would make life much easier if she agreed to the arrangements I

described.

"I'll do my best, ma'am."

Dismissively: "Very well."

She scarcely registered my existence. No more than the furniture in the lounge, or the vehicle that was waiting for her outside. The Diva was wrapped up, I can only assume, in the coming performance and her part in it.

*So very...*

Yet I might be the one to step between her and a killer's bullet.

*...beautiful.*

There was an escort of half a dozen cars, with armed officers in uniform, to take the Diva to the Hotel Pacifica which we had already secured. Plainclothes detectives were in residence in the rooms above, below and to either side of her suite.

If she truly was in danger, and the pattern followed that established in other countries, then the risk lay in the theatre itself, during the performance.

*So beautiful.*

And in the middle of the night, that was where I went: the Brazhinski Theatre.

I prowled the galleries. I scoured private boxes and public balconies: tracking vectors, evaluating hiding-places, listing places of concealment and angles of attack, while the nightwatchman and two patrolmen tracked my progress.

Too many places to hide.

There would be uniformed officers at the exits during the performance, and that helped. If the killer – if there was a killer – was willing to commit suicide, then the situation was fraught. But if he wanted to make an escape, all right: I could ensure that his egress was blocked, publicly and visibly. He could take the Diva's life only by giving up his own.

*I still don't like it.*

Because if someone was insane enough to want her dead in the first place—

*They would sing beautifully...*

I shook away the thought.

*...so beautifully, her bones.*

What I had to do boiled down to three things. First, put prominent, visible security in place: better to discourage the perpetrators from trying than to be a hero and aim for an arrest. Second, keep watch during the performance itself. Track the audience members constantly; watch for anything suspicious. Be prepared to use deadly force among an audience composed of the city's most wealthy and influential citizens, where any action at all could cost me my career, and a mistake – like a bullet which missed the killer and struck an innocent person – might be rewarded with the hangman's rope.

*I don't want to become a fusion pile component.*

Oh, yes. The third thing.

I should not get hung up on the performance itself. If someone wanted to stage – ha! – a very public killing, that would be an ideal place. But I'd better not take it for granted. They could go for her anywhere: in the dressing-

room, in the car journey to or from the theatre. In her hotel suite. Anywhere at all.

My headache was coming back.

In my dingy apartment, I hauled myself through chin-ups from the exposed ceiling pipes, press-ups on the worn grey floorboards, and sit-ups with my feet hooked under the iron-framed bed. Deep knee bends, trying to avoid splinters in my bare feet.

Then I showered in the tiny tin stall, under a miserable trickle which gave out before I'd finished rinsing off. Feeling scratchy, I sat down at the small kitchen table with half a pint of bourbon, twisted off the cap, and proceeded to drink.

That night I dreamed.

Of the Diva.

Day-shift started at eight. So it was at five o'clock – a.m. – that I ran through near-deserted streets in my threadbare tracksuit beneath pre-dawn skies, along slick wet sidewalks where cracked lamps flickered. Steam rose from manhole covers. Occasionally, a low moan sounded from a wall-mounted pipe.

At the orphanage school, old Sister Mary Thanatos taught us that the sounds are caused by the passage of steam, the expansion and contraction of metal piping, and bear no relation to the dark source of that power. "Thermodynamics," she used to say, "and the properties of metals." Nothing to do with necroflux or the reactors beneath our streets.

But I could not help comparing those eerie tones to the groans of the dying, the sobs of the bereaved.

I ran faster.

And finally, performance night. The cars drawing up: stretch limousines, with their glittering bodywork. The uniformed chauffeurs who stood respectfully out of the limelight as their clients walked in finery along the wide red carpet leading into the theatre.

The crowds: watching and milling.

No sign of weapons, of scowling faces, of a professionally blank expression which might hide a calculating killer's mind.

*If I were an assassin, where would I be?*

I prowled, learning nothing.

But I was outside her door when the stage assistant, flushed and breathless with anxiety, tapped on her door and said:

"Miss daLivnova? Five minutes."

I checked my shoulder holster, drew my gun. Slid out the magazine, checked its shining load of copper-coloured deathbringers, snapped it shut once more.

Reholstered.

"Why, the glamorous detective! It's..."

The dressing-room door was swinging open, and her flawless features glimmered with a magic I cannot describe. And then she smiled.

My breathing stopped.

"...show time."



Nothing happened. Nothing untoward.

It was a miraculous performance, and the rousing finale paralysed my heart. I was entranced, despite myself, by the spotlit apparition of the Diva on stage. For that moment she was unguarded – captivating the souls of the people who were supposed to be guarding her: the other officers were awestruck too – but no shot rang out from the crowd, from the shadows beyond the bright-lit stage.

And then the swirling party afterwards, the headache of observing glittering guests – diamond tiaras, massive gold rings, bright smiles which widened with unaccustomed sincerity – followed by relief, watching the kaleidoscope wind down in the early hours of morning.

*Dangerous* relief: I kept prodding myself into alertness, in case the killer struck now, in the emotional aftermath as everyone lowered their exhausted guard.

Finally, Commissioner Treevor – rotund, dressed in his finest tuxedo with a crimson cummerbund: he had enjoyed the performance from his private box – came up and delivered congratulations on a job well done.

“Go home, rest.” He waved a fat, unlit cigar. “You’ll be busy again tomorrow.”

“Yes, sir.” Another night of being a glamorous detective.

But I waited one more hour, until all the guests were gone, then I followed the Diva and her twelve-strong uniformed escort to the hotel. She arrived safely.

Afterwards, I stuffed my hands in my raincoat pockets, and shambled through the streets back to my tiny apartment where shadows waited for my return.

Some kind of glamour.

In this city, daytime never amounts to more than glimmering grey sky, forever weak. Dawn is a pimp’s contract with the world.

What I hate about switching to night-shift is that it’s hard to find a quiet place to run. Even when the city’s office blocks are crammed with employees at their wooden desks fitted with pneumatic message-tubes, their important Bakelite phones, still the sidewalks are busy. I hate waiting at intersections for battered grey cars and purple taxis to pass, before running onwards through the smog.

That’s why I run the catacombs.

Only the rich can afford to bury their dead away from the fusion piles – the burial fee is 100,000 florins, which would pay my rent for decades – and that’s one reason why the casings are of heavy polished brass, securely locked. They gleam as you run past, down ancient stone tunnels where few people tread.

Of course there are whispers.

*One comes...*

Usually, I can ignore them as I run. Today my skin crawled.

*Danger.*

Upping the pace.

*Danger and...*

I poured on the speed.

*...the beauty of the drawing dark.*

Foot splashing in a dank puddle.

*Do you feel it, calling?*

Sprinting now.

*Do you feel the song?*

And then I was into the larger caverns, away from the tunnels – relief! – as the strange whispers slid away. I slowed to a walk, sweat-soaked, heart pounding with more than exertion.

*It’s never been this bad.*

And I wondered, as I dragged myself up the worn stone stairs, whether these rich folks’ bones held knowledge as well as memory, echoed with more than fragments of a forgotten and extinct past.

*Do you feel the song?*

I reached the top, and banged on the door until the custodians let me out.

Second performance.

Lights, swirls: the songs, the magic. The spellbound audience. The darkness beyond, where the killer might wait.

The congratulations afterwards.

Journalists. The fans.

And the wandering home alone when the glittering spell is done.

Next day, I ran along the sidewalks.

Neither pedestrians nor the traffic bothered me. Obstacles and smog, and waiting to cross the streets... they slowed my run, but they did not whisper, and that was good enough.

Afterwards, the water in my shower remained hot, coming out of the nozzle in a strong jet, for as long as I wanted. Later, my freshly laundered shirt and suit felt good against my skin.

*Perhaps it’s going be OK.*

But the third night was when it happened.

The final aria was sublime.

For all the magic of the previous performances, they might have been warm-ups, preliminary stages to a blinding spell which was surely the apex of the Diva’s career: a conjuration of sound and emotion beyond anything else the world could offer.

Killers be damned... I stood frozen in the wings, paralysed, unable to take my eyes off centre-stage, and the glorious figure who drew magic with her voice. Pure, silver voice, delineating the Lady Elena’s grief over the body of her dead king. Rose to dizzy heights, a lowering, then the true finale. Sweetness. And the drawing off, a post-coital lover’s embrace. The honeyed, drawn-out ending of the song to end all songs.

Afterwards, nothing.

Stunned silence. Not even breathing.

*My God...*

And then, a woman’s sob.

Like one being, the audience rose to their feet, and began to clap.

And then the cheers and applause rose to thunderous crescendo, echoed back from the great theatre’s cathedral-like space, the opulent boxes and gold-leaf painted galleries, filled with consensual joy.

From the wings, blinking tears from my eyes, I watched her bow.

The applause faded, petered out. There was a final clap, embarrassed.

Then a gasp from the balcony.

This was no standing ovation.

The entire half-dozen rows at the front, some 300 people in gowns and tuxedos, were on their feet. In silence. They filed out from their seats, stood before the front row, and stopped.

Then, one slow pace at a time, they advanced in unspeaking unison upon the stage, a bright and fearful hunger glowing in their eyes.

*No. It was never a killer.*

Black glimmering in the air above them: a communal magic, strong enough to draw illusions to rewrite witnesses' memories. To make some into active servants, and to etch the minds of everyone here. Afterwards, to alter their perceptions of what occurred.

Had the others died in this fashion?

*Not a single killer.*

That shining blackness held me frozen, like everybody else... then something snapped inside me – it felt like that, an audible crack in my brain as the trance-shift training finally kicked in: a professional reflex – and I was free to move.

*Yes, move.*

She was paralysed too, the Diva.

Held in place not by the black spell, but by terror.

*Move now!*

I sprinted onto the stage.

My arm caught her by the waist, sheer momentum carrying us onwards, and then she was keeping pace with me.

*"Wait –"*

A pause in the wings, while a threatening moan rose up from the audience – from the 300-strong ensorcelled segment at the front – but the Diva clung to me as she kicked off her shoes.

*"All right. Which –?"*

I tugged her towards the fire exit.

*Run.*

Sounds of pursuit, and a cold viscous shivering in the air.

*Run hard.*

Furious questions boiled in my brain as we tore along the dank alleyway, ducked among shadowed crates – *no, don't stop* – then left the hiding-place to run onwards, into a darkened street where the lamps were cracked and rats scurried out of sight as we hurtled past.

Questions. Could the audience be responsible for the killings: all members of the same conspiracy? Unlikely. More probably, they were held in thrall by some dark power. But either way, could they follow us?

And were there others, partners or servants, who might hunt us down?

*"I can't –"* The Diva was gasping.

*Can't stop.*

I hauled her onwards, along another deserted alley and then the narrow street, noting that her dress was ripped, catching a glimpse of ivory breast but discarding the vision, no time for messing around. Looking for the non-descript stone bunker I knew must stand nearby.

*"Not much farther."* I squeezed her upper arm tight enough to hurt. *"Quickly, and we might survive this."*

It crouched like a dark stone igloo, wrapped in shadows on the street corner.

Adrenaline must have powered her body because the Diva ran as fast as me, nearing the shelter. My police badge, shoved into the scanner slot, passed muster. The massive stone door swung open: silently, on well-oiled heavy-duty hinges.

Inside, I pressed the square red metal plate which caused the door to close behind us.

*Safe? Perhaps.*

It was quiet in here.

*"Which way, Lieutenant?"*

I pointed at the spiral stairs.

*"Down."*

She was drenched with sweat, leaning against me as we walked the catacombs, heading for the only safe place I could think of.

*"Save me,"* she said, and the emotion in her miraculous eyes was genuine, even if it wasn't love.

*"I will."*

But even as we hurried on, whispers slid across my skin.

*So beautiful, her songs.*

I pushed her roughly, increased the pace.

*So beautiful, her bones.*

*"Faster now."*

*Do you feel the song?*

Moving through stone tunnels, past brass-doored tombs. Whispers of the dead tugging at my mind. Not enough to hide the clatter which sounded behind us.

*"They're following!"*

I drew my gun part-way out of the shoulder holster, replaced it. *"I know."*

There was blood on her feet, crimson and strangely beautiful against her elegant skin, but the Diva made no complaint. We hurried until the great black iron doors came into sight, and I knew we had a chance of getting out of this alive.

Dragon, iron, looking down on us.

*"I don't like this place,"* the Diva whispered. *"There's something here."*

Drawing out my pistol, reversing it, I hammered the butt against the door.

*"I know. But this is where we have to go."*

Slowly – too slowly – the big doors swung inwards, and a lean face peered out.

I flashed my badge as we half-fell inside.

*"Close the doors and bar them. Don't let anyone else in."*

*"Yes, sir."*

The attendant was already pushing them shut as we hurried towards the nearest aisle between reactors.

*Safe, for the moment.*

We headed for the director's office, where I could call for back-up. But I remembered that no one helped us at the theatre, even though uniformed officers were stationed in every gallery and corridor. The men weren't trance-trained and spell-shielded: nobody expected a thau-maturge attack of this magnitude.

My only chance was to call Captain Fielding, get an armoured response team here to guard us until a federal spellbinder could fly in from Viropolis. I was rehearsing the phone call, programming my fingers to dial the seldom-used number, when I heard a scraping noise from up ahead.

We stopped.

Silently, we moved out of the aisle, hid behind a shadow-shrouded buttress.

Just for a moment, I thought we had a chance. Then footsteps echoed from the alleys and aisles at either end, low voices muttered.

They had encircled us.

*Get back to the surface.* It was a shut-ended situation: the refuge had become a trap, and there was no way to reach the director's office alive. I had made a mistake, and the consequences were likely to be mortal.

*"I'm afraid,"* she whispered.

I squeezed her hand, for whatever reassurance that might give. Then I drew out my gun, which steadied my nerves just a little.

*This way,* I mouthed silently.

Keeping to the reactor's edge, we moved back into the bright-lit aisle which separated two rows of fusion piles. I glanced up – there were buttresses and girders that I might have been able to climb alone, but the Diva was already shivering from exhaustion: it was a wonder she could stand – then snapped my attention back to floor level.

Figures ran across the gaps between reactors, taking up position.

I squeezed off a shot, and a small man fell writhing, lay still. But not before I had seen the strange gleam in his eyes: he was a parazombie, suborned by some dark spell to do another's bidding, and strictly innocent in this whole affair. Probably, the others were the same: Energy Authority workers taken over by the conspiracy.

*Damn.*

It made me wonder about Director Cortindo, and whether he had any part in this. But that was for later.

*"Throw down your weapon, Lieutenant O'Connor."*

The voice was strangely flat, though it echoed among the girders and obsidian reactor casings. A parazombie, mouthing words from an unseen, distant master.

*"I can't do that."*

Even if I had to shoot down innocent puppets of the real enemy, I could not let them take the Diva. Not now.

Not ever.

*"You must."*

There was a metallic click behind me, and something hard pressed against my head – the Diva's eyes widened; the perfect mouth which had delivered the song to end all songs opened in silent fear – and I knew it was over.

I dropped my weapon.

It clattered to the floor, ending hope.

We stepped out onto wide flat flagstones, beneath a strange blue-cast light. They surrounded us: a ring of more than 20 men – with one flat-faced woman, in uniform – whose eyes held the ensorcelled look of parazombies. Humans reduced to automata.

Wordlessly, guns trained upon us, they waited.

I raised my hands.

"I'm sorry." The Diva whimpered, clutching me. "Don't let them do this."

I swallowed, but did not lower my hands. There was nothing I could do.

It was unprofessional, the way their weapons were aimed. If it all took off, then they would kill each other in crossfire, but as far as the Diva and I were concerned that was irrelevant: we, too, would die beneath the cascade.

Then a familiar, elegant voice sounded:

"Thank you for waiting. You're very kind, Lieutenant, to bring the lady right here. Most convenient."

Several of the parazombies shuffled aside, and Director Cortindo – as I had more than suspected: had known – stepped forward.

"As a collector of fine things, I appreciate the beauty of your work."

The derringer in his hand was enamelled, custom-built and hand-painted. An expensive toy, aimed not at me, but at the Diva.

"Time to die," he said.

Right then, I moved.

My right hand swept down, in a *pa-kua* palm-shift of my own – it was not only Cortindo who studied the fighting arts – and he spun away but I was faster.

The Diva gave a small shriek but the parazombies didn't fire, not when I had their master in the target zone, and then we were into it. Director Cortindo whipped his pistol backhand at my temple but I grabbed, punched hard into his triceps, and the weapon went flying.

Something hammered into my lower ribs – his knee, I think – and I felt the crack as I doubled over, breath on fire.

Trying to inhale, I forced myself upright.

*"Now!"* he yelled.

And that was the moment.

The Diva was trapped, eyes widened – a rabbit beneath the spotlight – and if I moved fast I could cover her body with my own, or spin the director into the line of fire: getting him killed or causing the parazombies to hold back long enough for me to end it.

*The beauty...*

But that was the moment.

*The beauty of her bones.*

I froze.

*Do you feel the song?*



God help me, I froze *solid*.

A dozen fingers squeezed simultaneously, a dozen triggers travelled short arcs. A composite bang hammered the air. Bullets tore into her elegant torso, ripped her organs apart in a spattering gout of thick crimson blood.

That was the moment.

*I'm sorry...*

The moment I allowed to happen.

*...my love.*

And then the rage.

*Do you feel the song?*

It was too late for the director. I stabbed fingertips into his eyes, clawed with murderous rage, then grabbed his jaw and hair and twisted, hard, as I bent him across my knee. A loud crack as vertebrae snapped.

I dropped his corpse to the floor.

*Do you feel...?*

Around me, parazombies toppled, comatose. In need of thauatomedical care.

Dying, the Diva shivered once on a widening, glistening pool of wine-dark blood, and her mouth formed an accusation her shredded lungs could no longer voice.

*You promised...*

And then she died.

I don't know.

I will *never* know... whether I hesitated from fear, or held back for that split second because of sneaking whispers from the spirits who wanted her dead.

Because I wanted her to die?

*She didn't love me, the bitch.*

Such a hard thought isn't mine. Can't be mine.

*I risked everything for her.*

I'm a professional. I was doing my job.

Only my job.

But she was more than just another assignment.

*If only she'd loved me.*

Hot tears track down my cheeks as I pick up her fine, blood-soaked body. I step over the fallen men, carry her away from this place of the dead.

*So beautiful...*

Their whispers cling, try to draw me back, but I ignore them.

*Do you feel the song?*

On the surface now, I stand with my bloody burden in a small courtyard, beneath a blank night sky touched with emerald. The place is silent and deserted: whoever manned it, they're down below, among the fallen.

Three cars are parked here, and I choose one: big and black, with hard fins and a wide, malevolent grill across the front. The trunk opens at my touch. I roll the Diva's beautiful corpse inside, and slam the lid down.

Inside a booth, on hooks, I find the keys to all three cars. The unwanted ones go down a drain.

*Do you feel the song?*

The engine growls into life. I leave it running as I step over to the outer gates – heavy black iron, but finely balanced – and swing them open.

Then I get back inside the car, and drive out onto the dark, cobbled street beyond.

Driving.

Into the mist.

Where am I going?

I have a vacation home, beside a silent black lake where no fish survive. Inherited from my parents, single-storey and built from slate, with a deep cold cellar. None of my colleagues – I think – are aware of its existence.

*Do you...*

There, I will clean my treasures, scrape them into a pristine state, and store them on cushions covered with the finest silk. To hold that skull against my temple. To pick up those elegant metacarpals and kiss them, while in my spirit the song to end all songs rises to sweet and glorious crescendo, forever mine.

*...feel the song?*

At least, until they track me down – my colleagues, or the dead director's secret allies – and we fight for the most miraculous prize.

Diva's bones.

**John Meaney**, the author of four sf novels since his first book, *To Hold Infinity* (1998), is another *Interzone* discovery (class of 1992). His previous stories in the magazine include "Sharp Tang" (issue 82), "Parallax Transform" (issue 89), "A Bitter Shade of Blindsight" (issue 110), "The Dreamlode" (issue 158), "The Whisper of Discs" (issue 183) and "Entangled Eyes Are Smiling" (issue 190). He lives in Tunbridge Wells, Kent.

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# The Odds Against Tomorrow

or

## HOW I SPENT MY SUMMER VACATION

Gary Westfahl

I recently discussed a time when my wife, observing me hard at work (as always) on the computer, said, "You need more fun in your life." I immediately responded, "I *hate* having fun!" It's true: I have come to regard the leisure activities cherished by most people – movies, concerts, sports, vacations, long conversations with friends – only as annoyances, keeping me away from productive labour. And when circumstances force me into such situations, I struggle to find some aspect of the experience to study and reflect upon, so as to garner tangible rewards from ephemeral pleasures.

This summer, my family insisted on vacationing in Laughlin, Nevada, a resort community that offers cheap food, lodging, and entertainment to attract gamblers, and hence functions as an economical getaway for persons like myself and my wife who never gamble. Yet I found myself unable to relax by soaking in the spa or watching the shows; instead, I was examining my surroundings, taking notes, analyzing data.

When staying at Harrah's Resort and Casino in Laughlin, or any Nevada hotel for that matter, one necessarily spends a lot of time looking at gambling machines, since hotels are cunningly designed to require all guests to walk past them. Once, these were "slot machines," devices containing three wheels covered with symbols sent randomly spinning by the pull of a handle, the hoped-for outcome being that the wheels would stop with three

symbols aligned and trigger floods of coins. Today, one still pulls a handle, but the spinning wheels are virtual, images on a television screen, and video technology has generated new varieties of machines, such as video poker machines.

Many machines have only utilitarian decor; video poker machines are usually labelled only with textual descriptions. Other machines have names and illuminated illustrations referencing the money one might earn, like a machine named "Strike It Rich" depicting huge piles of coins. Some more creatively feature anthropomorphic animals gazing alluringly at potential customers, their big eyes promising instant wealth in exchange for a quarter. There are machines with pictures of knights, cowboys, and hard-boiled detectives. Others are based on board games, television game shows, films, and television programmes.

When I saw a gambling machine entitled "Creature from the Black Lagoon," with a picture of the classic Gill Man, I figured out something worthwhile to do: I would determine how many gambling machines were based on science fiction and fantasy, and what titles and themes they had. Others have written about science fiction and fantasy video games and computer games; I would become the first to write about science fiction and fantasy gambling machines.

So, I walked through Harrah's and recorded the names and quantities of all machines related to science fiction or fantasy. I found 12 types of

machines, and a total of 59 machines, that matched my parameters. The detailed results:

### *Science Fiction Gambling Machines* (4 types, 15 machines)

"Austin Powers" –	2 machines
"Boom!" (picture of rocketship, background of stars) –	5 machines
"Creature from the Black Lagoon" –	4 machines
"Little Green Men" (picture of green alien on flying saucer) –	4 machines

### *Fantasy Gambling Machines* (8 types, 44 machines)

"The Addams Family" –	1 machine
"Break the Spell" (picture of wizard with magic wand) –	5 machines
"Dragon Treasure" –	3 machines
"Enchanted Unicorn" –	5 machines
"Frog Prince" –	10 machines
"I Dream of Jeannie" –	10 machines
"Leprechaun's Gold" –	6 machines
"The Munsters" –	4 machines

I could have inflated the figures for fantasy machines by including the aforementioned machines featuring pigs in overalls, chickens dressed as male strippers ("Chickendales"), and so on, but I restricted myself to machines foregrounding the characters and tropes of genre fantasy. Other casinos undoubtedly included additional types of science fiction and fantasy machines that I was overlooking, like the "Jekyll and Hyde" machine I glimpsed at another hotel, but I had obtained a rep-

representative sampling of the machines along these lines now available.

Of course, the numbers meant nothing in themselves without comparing them to the numbers of other types of machines. I needed the total number of gambling machines in Harrah's, information that proved surprisingly difficult to obtain. Three employees professed to have no idea how many machines there were, and the one who ventured a guess offered a number – around 700 or 800 – that I knew was much too low. Perhaps hotels don't want guests to know just how many one-armed bandits they deploy. So, instead of interrogating Harrah's workers, I decided the best way to determine the total number of machines was to count all of them myself.

Well, I thought, it sure beats lounging around the pool or enjoying a nice cold beer at the bar.

I walked through the entire gambling area twice, counting each and every machine. The first time, my total was 1187; the second time, it was 1188. Concluding that my tally was reasonably accurate, I chose the figure of 1188 (not that using 1187 would make any difference).

The statistics: the percentage of machines with science fiction themes was 1.3%; the percentage of machines with fantasy themes was 3.7%; the total percentage of machines with science fiction or fantasy themes was 5.0%. If one removes from consideration the machines arguably linked more to comedy than to science fiction and fantasy ("Austin Powers," "The Addams Family," "I Dream of Jeannie," "The Munsters"), the total percentage plummets to 3.5%.

The contrast with this era's other form of interactive electronic entertainment – video games and computer games – could not be stronger. Though many games are based on sports, car racing, World War II, and the like, it seems obvious, even without statistical proof, that a majority of today's games involve science fiction or fantasy. Yet the genres apparently figure in only a tiny fraction of today's gambling machines. The virtual invisibility of science fiction, which I will now focus on, is especially striking.

What does this all mean? Perhaps, nothing. Video games and computer games appeal primarily to the young, who grew up in a mediascape dominated by science fiction. Gambling machines appeal primarily to the old, who grew up when the genre was less prominent and may be less enamoured of its icons. People who play video games and computer games only want to have fun. People who play gambling machines may be driven by desperate greed, so glitzy science fiction imagery

may be the last thing they care to think about – engendering a preference for unadorned machines that announce in a businesslike manner what they are and how much money they provide. Owners of major science fiction franchises like *Superman* and *Star Trek* happily license characters to wholesome video games and computer games, but may resist allowing their family-friendly heroes to be tainted by association with the unsavoury business of gambling. There are numerous ways to explain why manufacturers create relatively few science fiction gambling machines, and why the machines they do create remain relatively uncommon.

Still, something significant may be at work here. Not all science fiction fans are young; not all gamblers are old. Given the pervasiveness of science fiction in other media, one would naturally expect more machines along the lines of "Martian Millions," "Asteroid of Gold," and "Mission to Moneyworld." And if superstars of science fiction like *Superman* or *Captain Kirk* aren't available, the owners of *Flash Gordon* and *Buck Rogers* surely wouldn't mind profiting from their moribund franchises with a gambling machine or two.

To explain my research findings, I offer a working hypothesis: people who like science fiction generally don't like gambling, and people who like gambling generally don't like science fiction. Hence, gambling machines with science fiction themes don't make a lot of sense (or a lot of cents).

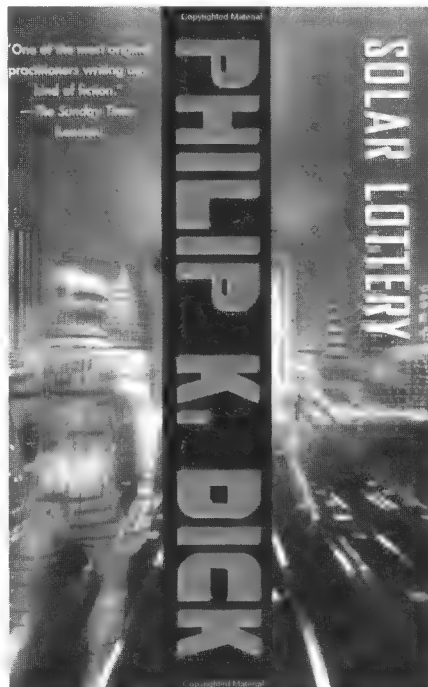
The basis of science fiction, the argument would proceed, is extrapolation, examining the course of past and present events in order to extend the curve into the future and make plausi-

ble predictions. Implicit in the process is a belief that the world can be explained and understood to provide a basis for rational forecasting and decision-making. To earn money, then, a science fiction reader would study various investments and choose one with a track record promising generous returns.

The basis of gambling, however, is the different belief that the world is essentially chaotic, inexplicable, and unpredictable. What happens tomorrow depends purely on chance. To earn money, a gambler logically relies entirely on luck, since nothing else can be relied on; and while some forms of gambling like blackjack or poker do involve skills that can be mastered to improve results, gambling machines involve no skills, only luck, and hence appeal to persons happy to depend only on luck. Science fiction readers would not be attracted to such methods of making money, and people so attracted would not enjoy science fiction.

To explore this idea, I asked members of the Fictionmags listserv if they knew about any science fiction writers or fans with a gambling problem. Now, a question about alcohol or drug problems would have engendered a tidal wave of responses; but only three people responded to my query about gambling addiction with mildly worded comments about a few people who possibly liked gambling too much. (One message suggested that highly intelligent science fiction devotees would generally know too much about probability to succumb to gambling; however, knowledge of unfortunate consequences has never kept highly intelligent people away from alcohol, drugs, and other addictions.)

In any event, the attitudes of the science fiction community may be best expressed in its literature, not its behaviour, so I looked at some relevant texts. Gambling at best is viewed as a risky but survivable diversion, as in Fritz Leiber's "Gonna Roll the Bones" (1967), and space casinos are occasionally colourful settings for adventure novels like Mack Reynolds's *Satellite City* (1975) and Ron Goulart's *Everybody Comes to Cosmo's* (1988). More scathing is Harlan Ellison's "Pretty Maggie Moneyeyes" (1967), where a down-and-out gambler in Las Vegas, after realizing "what is wrong and immoral and deadly about Vegas, about legalized gambling, about setting the traps all baited and open in front of the average human," dies when his soul is sucked into a slot machine already occupied by another of its victims. But a more interesting and intellectual argument against gambling emerges in Philip K. Dick's *Solar Lottery* (1955), depicting a future govern-





ment based entirely on luck: depending on random twists of a bottle, any citizen at any time might be anointed the new Quizmaster, master of the solar system. (To some, this might seem as good a way as any to choose leaders, and one scholar even proposed selecting legislators with a lottery, to achieve a representative body of citizens to make decisions.) A further element of chance is that while anyone opposed to a Quizmaster can hire trained assassins, the Quizmaster is guarded by telepaths who can detect and foil any assassin following a plan; hence, "You can't have a strategy against telepaths; you have to act randomly. You have to not know what you're going to do next."

While at times the novel halfheartedly defends this form of government, both Dick and his major characters despise it, making the novel a dystopia. The system is portrayed as a regrettable consequence of "The disintegration of the social and economic system": "people lost faith in natural law itself. Nothing seemed stable or fixed; the universe was a sliding flux... the very concept of cause and effect died out. People lost faith in the belief that they could control their environment; all that remained was probable sequence: good odds in a universe of random chance." And Dick's deposed Quizmaster complains that "we're all a bunch of superstitious fools .... We're

all dependent on random chance; we're losing control because we can't plan."

While relying on luck is thus viewed as undesirable, Dick further discredits such a strategy by having characters subvert the randomness to be influenced by their careful planning. The twists of the bottle turn out to be not entirely unpredictable; the new Quizmaster gained his position by secretly altering the bottle so it would display bias in his favour. The deposed Quizmaster plans to assassinate his successor with a robot alternately possessed by the minds of 24 individuals in remote locations who randomly rotate being in command, making it impossible for telepaths to focus on and follow one individual mind. However, the process turns out to be not truly random; one person is secretly controlling who is in charge of the robot to ensure that someone he dislikes will commit the murder and be killed himself. And just as individuals introduce causality to these previously random events, the novel concludes with another new Quizmaster implicitly determined to openly reintroduce causality to the flawed government he now oversees.

Members of the science fiction community do not want to embrace a "universe of random chance"; rather, they want to believe in "cause and effect." They wish to "plan," and to see

the predictable results of such plans. Confronted with apparent randomness, they seek to discern or impose a pattern. They aren't interested in gambling.

The irony is that modern physics increasingly endorses the notion that God in fact plays dice with the universe, that there are chaotic systems where future events are utterly unpredictable. Relying on extrapolation may be futile; the future of individuals, and humanity in general, may be purely a matter of chance, so investors may be wise to put their money into gambling machines and hope for the best. But science fiction writers and readers, like many scientists, remain Newtonians at heart, believing in a clockwork universe amenable to logical explanation and confident prediction, and are disinclined to leave everything up to Lady Luck.

Thus, though constantly enticed to put coins into machines that might provide a fortune in return, I instead chose to work in a place of play, to find an interesting pattern in its chaos of flashing lights and ringing bells, and to develop from my work an article that would, I could reasonably predict, be published to earn the modest rewards of a little recognition and a few pounds. Instead of gambling, in other words, I went for the sure thing.

Gary Westfahl

*Continued from page 20*

*From audience: Or how much latitude you gave him.*

Clement: Well, I was measuring latitude in terms of gravities.

*Question from audience: Could you give new writers some guidelines for creating what you think are realistic or believable aliens?*

Clement: I would only demand that they obey reasonable engineering laws. A lot of people now keep saying that you absolutely need water for life. I don't feel that's true. I agree that you need a solvent. You need a liquid. Gaseous life is going to be very difficult because the molecules needed to do all the things that life does, selection and rejection of materials taken in, moving around, and all that sort of stuff, would take complex molecules, and molecules that complex you're not going to find in a gas, because if you try to heat up anything that complex into the gas state, which is theoretically possible, molecules of that sort are going to break up and they're not going to be the same molecules any more. You can get all the complexity you want in the crystalline form, but what does it *do*? I have never been able to dream up a convincing beach boy who couldn't show off his biceps to his girlfriend until he had

been massaged with a blowtorch into a dull red heat. As far as I am concerned, it is solution chemistry that you need, but I am not narrow-minded enough to insist that it be water.

*Question from audience: Where did you get the name Mesklin from? It sounds so much like mescaline.*

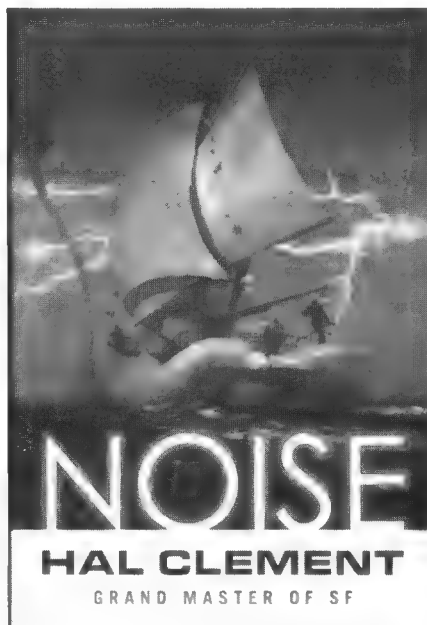
Clement: I don't think that when I dreamed up the name that mescaline

and similar substances had reached the popularity they achieved later on. It was just a short, pronounceable word, and that was it. I had no special love for that word, but it was a handy one to use. It didn't seem to mean anything.

*S: What areas of recent scientific development do you find most promising for use in more science fiction?*

Clement: Very largely the nano-tech, the pseudo-biology, you might say, the various fields which seem to be coming together so that we may have the ability to manufacture things which have many of the properties of life. I've been calling it pseudo-life. I think the first story in which I used the idea was in *Astounding*, or *Analog* as it was by then, in September 1966, "The Mechanic." It's been reprinted in the second volume of the NESFA collections. I've gone to the point where I've used hackers in that particular field making trouble for other people with their own micro-life. You can buy molecular seeds at this stage of the game, and just as regular hackers can buy chips and do unplanned things with them. A story of that sort did get published a few years ago in what is now *Absolute Magnitude*.

*S: Hal Clement, thank you very much. We've run out of time.*



# The Order of Things Must Be Preserved

*Darrell Schweitzer*

**I**t was the dampness that she hated more than anything else, the musty smell of crumbling plaster, of peeling wallpaper, of the very air itself inside the schoolroom, which seemed to cling to her disagreeably.

The numerous corpses, which occupied all the students' seats and even her own, which sat along the walls of the room as if giving her more rapt attention than her living charges – the very dead which lay stacked in such profusion in the corridor outside that one actually had to *touch* them when making one's way into the schoolroom – *those* were damp too. They almost seemed to sweat at times, even as their clothing (if they still had clothing) mildewed and rotted away.

The dead themselves would never rot away, of course, being part of the immemorial *order of things* that Miss R\_\_\_\_, the teacher, had devoted her life to preserving. *The inevitable, inert flesh of the dead is eternal*, was one of the lessons she pounded into her charges. When the children wriggled (as they had until recently, until a *reform* was made) into the schoolroom and sat or stood among the dead, it was Miss R\_\_\_\_'s duty to reinforce such precepts. It wasn't that she liked children. No, she

despised them, as she despised the clinging damp. She could resist the damp by bathing as little as possible, by using dry powders which gave her person a musty, dry smell of its own. Against the children, her only defence was her heavy stick, which she *thwacked* onto her desk-top again and again, while leading recitals of such important phrases as *The order of things must be preserved!*

She regarded herself, despite everything, as a kind and generous person, a selfless person who devoted herself to this important duty above all else. After all, she could point out, there were many, many dents in the surface of her desk, and few on the heads of her charges.

There were none at all on the flesh of the dead, of course, for it was they who were to be preserved above all else, by the will of the unseen government.

Therefore the children sat or stood or crouched, glum and wide-eyed, while she directed them through their lessons, while the dead, everywhere, seemed to laugh silently, or nod in agreement, or mock, or just ignore her.

The air was very close.

Then came the sudden change, the *reform* – *Crash! Smash!* She turned, amazed and found herself face-to-

face with the man in the bicorn hat, the old, fat, slightly lame gentleman, who walked the streets of the town and *represented the authority of the unseen government*. He had shattered the schoolroom window with his cane.

The children turned too, but did not react, waiting for direction from her.

She could only gape, and make little wordless sounds.

"There!" the man said. "Use the window from now on!"

And away he went. She leaned out the window and gazed after him with admiration and longing, but she could not bring herself to cry out. Instead, she merely accepted what had happened. She explained to her charges that henceforth they should enter the schoolroom through the broken window, which could not be closed or repaired regardless of the weather, since it was the directive of the unseen government that it remain open.

Primly, she picked out the remaining bits of glass from the window frame, lest anyone cut themselves, which would be disorderly.

It was only then that she noticed that her own hand was cut. She clutched her musty dress to make the bleeding stop.

This *reform* had been instituted, she later appreciated, precisely when it was needed, for it was only two or three evenings later that there came into her mind the unspoken certainty which all citizens of the town shared, something halfway between a vividly remembered dream and an incomprehensible compulsion. She knew that each and every one of them would rise at dawn and file wordlessly down through the steep, narrow streets to the great wharfs, where, in the night, great quantities of the newly-delivered dead had been left in heaps like fish in a market. It was her duty, and everyone's duty, as the man in the bicorn hat oversaw, to select one or more corpses for herself, and to take them back to her quarters (for she lived in a little loft above the schoolroom) and find a place for them.

That morning, as the fog thinned away, as the distant ships from which the dead had been unloaded faded from view as if they had been part of the fog, a particular zeal came over her. She loaded a dead child into her hand-wagon, then another, then an old woman, and wheeled them back to her place, dragging each of them into the hallway outside the schoolroom and leaving them with so many of their fellows. Then she returned to the docks for another load, and another, while the man in the bicorn hat smiled at her benignly (and she was *thrilled* at his attention, though she dared not acknowledge it so boldly as with an actual word or gesture). She laboured all day, and when she was done, she felt the pride that a mason feels when he slides the very last stone into place. The old entranceway to the schoolroom was completely packed, solid with corpses, so that no more than a serpent could have squeezed through.

With great foresight, then, the man in the bicorn had broken the window. Such was the benevolence of the unseen government to those who preserved the order of things.

That night, she lay, exhausted, on her back on the

schoolroom desk, clutching her stick (which she thought of as her sceptre) amid the crowd of the dead, in perfect darkness. She thought back over the events of the day, the events of several days, well aware that she, with her extraordinary sense of *order* and the need to preserve it, could sense the passage and pattern of time in the way that few others could.

She was, arguably, the only person in town who did more than drift through the fog of existence. Hers was no eternal, featureless present. She was perhaps the only one (other than the unseen government itself, no doubt) who could think in the past tense.

But that night, she felt an unease, a sense of timelessness, as in a dream she drifted through a clear blue sky, formless, without her stick in hand, with no voice to cry out.

She awoke with a grunt, feeling damp, startled to discover that the children had already assumed their positions throughout the classroom.

They must have crawled in at dawn, as soon as curfew ended. They must have seen her asleep on the desk, but had enough sense not to disturb her.

Patiently, they waited, while the sun shone dimly through the fog outside, the room lightened to a dull grey, and the faces of the almost countless dead were again discernable.

But all was not as it should be. One child, a boy, was out of his place. He stood trembling before the desk. He did not dare look up into her face (as well he should not). She saw that, like an increasing number of children in the class, he was emaciated, barefoot, and filthy. She supposed that poverty was part of the order of things, which was to be preserved by the design of the unseen government, and did not question the boy's appearance, but what *did not* fit into this scenario was that the boy dared stand before her holding a shiny, silk *top hat*, which he had no business ever putting his grubby, rat-like paws on.

She sat up on the desk, slid her legs around, and stood.

"How dare - ?"

"Please..." The boy blubbered. Tears and a runny nose left streaks on his dirty face. "I... I found it. In the street. It *fell from the sky*. The others saw it too."

He looked around for support from his classmates, but no other child would meet his gaze.

She snatched the top hat out of his hands.

"I thought I should give it to you right away," the boy said softly.

She realized that she did not know the child's name. She seldom bothered to learn the children's names. But she felt a certain satisfaction that this one had, apparently, absorbed his lessons well.

She poked him away from herself with her stick. Sobbing, shuffling, the boy took up his proper place against the wall, between the slumping corpses of two old women whose faces were drawn in perpetual grins.

"*The order of things!*" she shouted, pounding on the desktop with her stick with more emphasis than usual, "*must be preserved!*"

The children shouted in reply. She and her charges



recited the lesson back and forth, until it gained a half sing-song quality, yet rumbling, like thunder as a storm rises.

All the day she held the top hat in her free hand, sometimes tapping it against the desk top or against her thigh.

None of the children acknowledged it in any way, for it was a new thing, and she had not taught them any lesson about it, and new things, they knew, did not preserve the order.

Yet she herself could not preserve the order either, and once the children were gone for the day (crawling, one by one, out the broken window), she sat for a long time on her desk, holding the hat by the brim, turning it in her hands, considering the implications of the child's claim that it had *fallen from the sky*. That was, she knew, like an image out of a dream, and dreams, unless they were sent explicitly by the unseen government, were not part of the order of things. Therefore she always tried to forget her own dreams, appreciating, educated person that she was, the paradox that it was hard to forget something you concentrated on forgetting.

Any less energetic approach to life would not preserve the order. She had trained herself to forget things by sheer force of will.

Nevertheless, the hat, a solid, real object, was here in her hands. She trembled and sighed at the implications of it. The hat disturbed her so much that, to her own amazement, *even though it was after curfew*, she crawled out of the broken window herself and dropped into the street.

Now her heart was racing. She, herself, was in violation of the order, a *pervert*, as such people were called. She knew there had been a lot of *perversion* of late. Why, the predecessor of the man in the bicorn hat, a former functionary of the unseen government himself, had, somehow, in ways that could not be described or quite imagined, *defiled* his office, so that he had to be replaced by the present, more trustworthy official.

Perhaps she had once known, or even witnessed the predecessor's horrible acts, but through sheer force of will managed to forget them.

Now, in a kind of daze, she made her way through the cobblestoned streets, keeping to the shadows, repeating to herself over and over that what she did was for the best, to *preserve* the order, not to destroy it, that the present emergency – for *emergency* it surely was, that such a thing could happen – justified her actions.

More than anything else she thought of the man she had so admired from afar, the man in the bicorn hat, who personified in her mind the very order itself. *He* would know what all this meant. *He* would know what to do.

*He* would sit with her, patiently, and explain everything in a calm, quiet way. Perhaps, to comfort her, he would even take her hand in his, as... as... as a father might take his daughter's hand to comfort her. She liked to believe that the man was old enough to be her father, for all she feared that, on the rare occasions she peered into a mirror, the mirror would betray her.

She knew where he lived. What she had to do, then, was reach his dwelling before anything else happened,

before she fell asleep and started to *dream* with the knowledge of what she held in her hands.

For if top hats fell out of the sky for grubby children to find, then what was to become of the *order of things*?

The person of her desires, the man in the bicorn hat, resided, she knew, in an official residence of sorts, a loft behind the Town Hall, near the *green dome* beyond which one could glimpse the *white tower* wherein the unseen government itself was purported to gather.

Now, in the darkness, she dared to approach the base of the stairs, which wound behind the clock tower adjoining the Town Hall. Her man lived up there. She'd climb up, knock on his door, beg his forbearance, and explain what had happened.

He would understand, she knew.

She put her hand on the railing and mounted the first step. Something moved above her, but it was only a pigeon, on the ledge before the clock face.

She began to climb, stepping over a corpse.

She heard wooden gears creaking. She gazed up in horror and saw, before the clock face, moving wooden figures. She knew them, of course. Everyone in the town knew that at the *appointed times*, these automatons would rise from their coffins set in the side of the tower, make a gear-driven circuit, and perform their circumambulations before the clock face itself. They were as familiar as her own hands or face, stiff, trembling, with their once-bright paint faded and peeling: the reaper, the sower, the hearse-driver with his whip upraised.

They came before the clock face every day at the *appointed times*, but this was not the appointed time.

Yet the clock struck, and what followed could only have been a dream.

She heard impossible *laughter* from the loft at the top of the stairs, as if there were much *merrymaking*, which could only represent a *perversion* of the way things should be, quite impossible if her man, the supreme object of her desires, *were still there*.

But what if he were not?

Now her courage failed. She retreated, back down the stairs. Somehow it seemed that the *animate dead* were all around her, like grace wisps of smoke, yet solid at the same time. It was a paradox her mind could not resolve, because the unseen government, in all its wisdom, had never issued instructions on the matter.

The dead spun her around, as if to drag her into a whirlpool of a dance. She clung desperately to the top hat, afraid she'd lose it, that a corpse would snatch it from her as she had snatched it from that filthy child.

Such things did not happen in the *order of things*, she knew. Therefore she was dreaming. Therefore she was mad. Therefore she was a *pervert*, who had violated the order by her mere presence.

She looked up the stairs again, yearning for her man to descend, despite the hour, with the symbols of his office, his bicorn hat, his heavy coat with the tarnished buttons, and his cane. He would know what to do. He would preserve the order. Perhaps he would even be angry with her, rightfully so, for breaking curfew, *pervert* that she had become. Perhaps in righteous wrath he would beat her

with his cane, pounding the order of things into her once more as she pounded it into her charges (but mostly into her desktop) with her own stick. (Where was her stick anyway? She felt helpless without it.)

Even though he might (justifiably) look on her with loathing, her heart went out to him. She pitied him, for the ceaseless burden of his duties, yet looked to him for guidance even yet. She saw him as a naked giant, holding up the whole world. (*That* image must have come from a book.) She loved him very much. Yet she dared not confront him, not now, not this night of all nights. She would have to explain. She couldn't. That would make her *irredeemable* in his eyes, and she could not bear that.

Around her, the dead laughed, and danced.

At last she was able to break away and crawl under the stairs. She groped in the darkness, encountering several corpses. They were disagreeably cold and damp, their clothing like old, rotten paper which tore away when she brushed against them, but at least they *did not move* as she found a space for herself and huddled among them.

With no other recourse, she *put the top hat on her own head*, and remained there throughout the night, alternately dreaming and, *within the dream*, forcing herself to forget that same dream by sheer fervour of will.

What was she to do? A top hat had fallen out of the sky. It was for her to deal with it, somehow, that the order might be preserved.

She awoke, or dreamed that she awoke, in the grey fog of dawn. Trembling, weeping softly, with the top hat still on her head, she once more climbed the stairs. She passed the painted clock-tower figures, now asleep in their coffins, soon to be roused at the *proper hour* to summon the citizens from their houses.

Silently she climbed, stepping over corpses. Silently she stood before the door at the top of the stairs, struggling to summon the courage to knock, thinking back over all the times she had watched and admired the man in the bicorn hat through her schoolroom window.

Quickly, she snatched the blasphemous top hat off her own head and held it in her hands, in both hands, as the child had done, twirling the brim around and around nervously.

Then she noticed that the door was already ajar.

She pressed against it with her elbow and dared to enter the room.

She called out, but there was no answer. In terror she stood there, certain that she would be branded a *pervert* for merely being there, but as the day slowly lightened, she saw that there was *no one in the room* but for numerous corpses, most noticeably an enormous, nude fat woman who occupied the entirety of the bed, a mud-stained old woman in a filthy nightgown, curled as if asleep on the floor in front of an empty chair by a bare table, and, shockingly, an eminent citizen of the town, the redoubtable tavern-keeper V\_\_\_\_, lying beneath the windowsill, the whole side of his face covered with dark blood. He had been dead for, she somehow knew, several days at least. His flesh, unlike that of the other corpses,

had begun to bloat. She grasped for meaning, as she stood over him, holding the top hat. He couldn't have seen it fall. He had been *murdered* before then. She tried to fit these two facts together, as if to arrive at some final solution, but they were like pieces of a wooden puzzle that, *perversely*, didn't fit even though every other piece was already in place.

She concludes that this is the work of *perverts*, and that it is for her, despite her fallen state, her own moral lapses, to restore the order of things.

The fat woman on the bed seems to be laughing at her.

No, that cannot be. She is mad. She is dreaming. Corpses do not laugh. Not out loud anyway.

The dead woman's hand seems to be pointing.

There. On a little stand by the open door. A spyglass. It is an *official instrument*, which she has seen her man use before, and his predecessor before him.

She stands on the landing, hat on her head once more, spyglass in her hand. She peers into the distance, at the very summit of the *white tower*, now privy to the little-known fact that under precisely the right circumstances, with precisely the correct equipment (i.e., this official spyglass), the unseen government *is not entirely unseen*.

There, at the top. A tiny window. The Lord Mayor's residence. Someone sees her. Someone is waving. She knows what she has to do.

Hastily, then, she makes her way past the *green dome*, to the base of the *white tower*. She finds her way inside, and begins a perilous ascent. There are no corpses inside the tower, only dust and loose stones which sometimes fall at her touch, crashing and echoing, and an occasional raven which caws from the rafters. Up and around, up and around she climbs a spiral staircase for hours. Sometimes there is no staircase at all, and she must cling to no more than iron rungs, dangling from a dizzy and terrifying height.

But at last she reaches the top. A trapdoor *opens for her*, and the man of her dreams, the man in the bicorn hat, in the official coat with the many buttons, whose example has always been an inspiration to her, is waiting there for her. Beyond words, weeping, she falls to her knees, clinging to his legs.

Then, gently, he takes the silk top hat off her head, sets it on a desktop by his side, and takes *both her hands in his*, and raises her up, until they are *face-to-face*. She is trembling. She must close her eyes. But she can't. His gaze, she decides, is both stern and kindly, as should be the personification of the unseen government.

"Your loyalty is commendable," he says soothingly. "You have done precisely the right thing in coming to me."

He releases her. She steps back, gasping.

"Yes, yes," is all she can reply. "I thought... the order..."

"... must be preserved. No one knows about this, no one except the two of us?"

"A child found it... He has no idea what it means..."

"Nor can he ever. Nor can anyone," the man says, directing her to the other end of the long, brightly lit room. She gasps in amazement at the brilliant blue sky outside the window. They are above the clouds, above the

perpetual fog she has known all her life. A cool, clean breeze ripples curtains.

"Look here," he continues. By the far window is a high-backed chair with its back toward her, as if someone positioned it there to gaze into the heavens beyond. Now he man takes the top hat and places it on *something*, so that, for an instant it seems as if someone is indeed sitting in that chair, hidden from view but for the top of the top hat, which nods slightly.

"The order must be preserved," her man says, and piously she replies, "Yes, it must."

"That the order may be preserved," he says, "it is necessary that the people of the town *look up* to persons in my position, even as I, or my predecessor or successor, might use the *official spyglass* to gaze up to this very window and be reassured by a fleeting glimpse of the *visible embodiment of the unseen government*, the Lord Mayor himself, wearing his top hat, at work at his desk."

She is almost speechless, like a frightened child in her own class. "The – the –"

"Oh yes," he says, laughing. "*The Lord Mayor himself!* Allow me to introduce you."

She can only let out a little cry as he suddenly turns the chair around to reveal hat atop a mop handle, the mop set in a bucket. The hat totters in the breeze.

To her utter amazement, he then removes his own bicorn hat, tosses it contemptuously aside, lifts the top hat from off the mop handle, tosses mop and bucket, clat-

tering, to the floor, and places the Lord Mayor's top hat on his own head.

At the very end, she comes to three conclusions in quick succession. The first is that he does not love her, that he never did, that the gleam in his eye and the spirit animating his speech and his manner is closely related to the froth at the edges of his mouth. He is completely mad.

The second conclusion is that the room has been unoccupied for some time, as evidenced by the papers blown all over the floor, the books fallen from the shelves, and even the (inhabited) bird's nest atop one of the filing cabinets.

The third conclusion is that the order must be preserved. She mouths this truism aloud one last time.

The mayor apparently agrees with her. "No one must ever know," he says, as he turns suddenly and shoves her out the open window to her death before taking his place in the high-backed chair.

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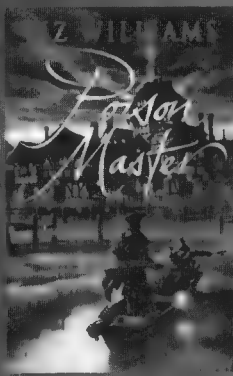
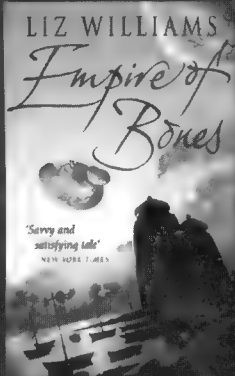
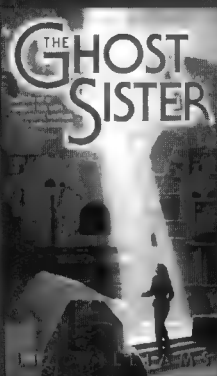
**Darrell Schweitzer's** most recent stories here were "Envy, the Gardens of Ynath, and the Sin of Cain" (issue 178), "The Runners in the Maze" (issue 186), "The Most Beautiful Dead Woman in the World" (issue 189) and "They Are Still Dancing" (issue 192). The above new piece is in the same sequence as the two last-named stories. A resident of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Darrell has written and edited numerous books.

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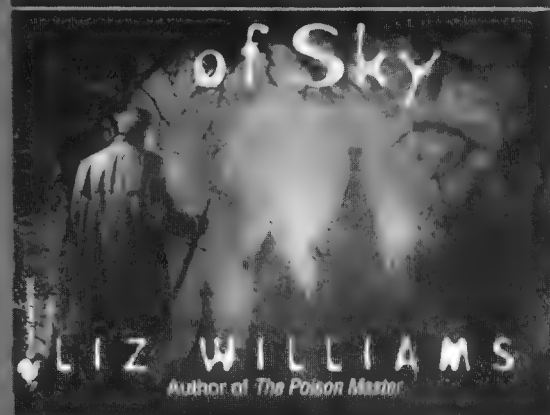
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## **Nine Layers**



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# Three Lions on the Armband

*Dominic Green*

**I**t was difficult to believe the rain was rain.

It fell in clumps, as if mankind were a bunch of cockroaches hunkering at the bottom of a cesspool into which God was dumping his celestial load, a solid brown mass slamming down onto umbrellas, car roofs, and unprotected human heads. If it wasn't able to batter directly through car roofs, it would eat through them in time; the sulphur dioxide it contained would bring out any metal object left out in the open in evil orange blotches. In the right (or wrong) weather conditions, it was said, it would even burn the skin.

The lanes beneath the concrete overhangs were the most sought-after locations, he knew. Luckily, in the mass of tormented cement that was Gordian Junction, the overhangs went on for miles. Somewhere above Luc's head, the M18157 Manchester-to-Sheffield Expressway scythed across the landscape towards Lathkill Dale and Chatsworth. All around him, the filter to the M18 towards Doncaster and Scunthorpe screwed down into the earth off three separate express routes, and deep beneath his feet, he knew, the ancient M1, granddaddy of all motorways, still burrowed on its way between Leeds and Lon-

don. By rights, vehicles should have been whirring round him like plastic pods on a fairground waltzer. The tiny roundabout Luc was standing on at the eye of this concrete hurricane, with its sign saying THESE GERANIUMS SPONSORED BY AVESTA POLARIT, should have been a place where, if you crashed your car without a mobile phone, you'd never escape alive.

Instead, he was surrounded by rusted hulks, the ones parked underneath the overhangs slightly less rusted, and some of them classics of yesteryear, even yestermillennium, preserved as perfectly as they would have been in anyone's garage. Luc recognized an Audi V2, protected by titanium bodywork from the acid moisture in the air. Further on was a Triumph-VW Stag Beetle convertible. Someone had filled it with water up to the sills, and a group of naked grinning Refu's were sitting in it enjoying the jacuzzi effects of a garage exhaust hose attached to the still running motor of a 2020 Nissan Gojira in the next lane and dipped into the water in the Beetle. The skins of the Refu's were flushed and pink with healthy carbon monoxide.

Behind him, washing was strung up between two dou-



ble-decker buses. The vehicles in here were still recognizable as vehicles, instead of being covered with acres of plastic sheeting to protect them from the rain. The air, even on a relatively cool spring day, was thick enough to blur the windows of every car on the carriageway.

"Happened one Friday in January in '21," said the man with the beard and the iron-grey stubble. "Everyone was droning round the road system just before rush hour in heavy snow, and there were three separate accidents, each one on a slip road running underneath the flyovers. There was traffic backed up for 30 miles in 16 directions, and the Emergency Services weren't able to get down into the tunnels under the flyovers to clear the wreckage, not even in helicopters. After six hours of waiting, people just started leaving their cars, thinking they'd come back to them later. By this time, you see, the temperature'd dropped to five below zero, freak weather for a British winter. And then, of course, it just wasn't possible for the police to move the vehicles. There were too many of them, and nobody to drive them. Eventually the government just gave the jam up as a bad job and built the South Yorkshire Relief Road around it. And after Sheffield got dirty-bombed, nobody needed to use the road in any case."

Luc looked up at a road sign which had once said ROTHERHAM  $\frac{1}{2}$ , and had now been oversprayed to say JAM TODAY, JAM TOMORROW. "And the Refu's moved into the cars."

"Well, there was nowhere else for them to go. Only about half of them are Brits. Some of the rest of them come from the Med, from the *maghreb*, the *mezzogiorno* and all the other poor areas along the coasts that got hit by the Mediterranean Dustbowl. Some of the newer ones came from Holland and Belgium after the dykes collapsed. Some of them are just very misguided economic migrants."

Luc noticed the number of garden-centre window boxes hanging from car windows, containing not flowers but vegetables. "What do they live on? Cannibalism?"

"They support themselves in a variety of ways. Many people mistakenly assume that they devote their days entirely to drug peddling, child prostitution, and muti killings. And indeed, much of their time is spent in such activities. But there are actually thriving industries here. Software, for example."

Luc could not believe his ears. "Software? Here?"

"Many large reputable international companies such as Microsoft, NovaSoft, PeopleSoft, PornoSoft, and Soft hire out cheap portable coding stations to Refu programmers. See that aerial over there? That's not a satellite TV dish. It's a radio modem. Perhaps half the software of the big corporations is written by paupers in shanty-town huts these days. They pass on their coding skills to their descendants." Cahill pointed to a line of what had once been executive saloons in the fast lane. "Those gentlemen there were once the technical staff of a Java programming house coming back to the office from a late lunch. They abandoned their cars in the snow, and returned to them a month later after their houses in Sheffield became radioactive. Now they run their business from the roadside."

"I see," said Luc, who really didn't.

"I broke down myself," said the older man, pointing to a

Nissan Wembando in the slow lane. The Wembando had a slightly darker patch of paint, in the shape of a fish, on its offside bumper. "So I thought I'd carry on business as usual from my new location. I didn't get sent here for my own safety like you did. You must have done something *really bad*. Something tells me your real name isn't Luke Jonah."

"It is. I am trying to escape the wrath of God by travelling up the M1 to Tarshish."

"Tarshish isn't on the M1."

"Archaeologists have never agreed on the exact location of Tarshish. It might be in Huddersfield." Luc leaned against a sign saying EXPECT DELAYS. "But yes. I did do something really bad. Cardinal Berlusconi sent me down here. He said nobody would look for me in a place only a madman would go." Luc, unsure whether his plastic surgery scars had healed, hastily changed the subject. "Are many of these people Christian?"

The bearded man adjusted his ABUSE DRUGS YOURSELF SMALL CHILDREN AND THE TRUST YOUR PARENTS PUT IN YOU parka and frowned behind his braided beard. "More than you'd think, despite the death squads. Our problem is not so much that none of them are Christian, but the sheer variety of Christian churches they belong to." He indicated a makeshift dome cobbled together like a caddis-fly larva out of pieces of dead car bonnets. "That over there appears to be a perfectly respectable crack house, but is in fact the Church of Christ's First Coming – a fairly middle-of-the-road lot as heretical sects go. They believe that Christ didn't actually come when the Church says he did, that we're still waiting for him to come and die for us. They believe, interestingly enough, that Christ will die of radiation sickness, and their holy symbol isn't a cross but a geiger counter. Over yonder," he said, gesturing northwards, "in what used to be part of a Moto service station, is the Holy Rude Church of Christ Homophobic, very popular with Africans, I believe; you have to use a special knock at the door and say Jah sent you. That big teepee made out of polythene and wobbly telegraph poles is the Perfect Church of the Cathari, and there are any number of different apocalyptic congregations scattered here and there – you know the sort of thing, Armageddon is happening now, Antichrist is loose on Earth as a big black man who wants our women, we must kill as many people of with creeds, colours and/or political orientations that differ from our own as possible right now to attain heaven, etcetera, etcetera... but of course, you must understand, every single church you see here is highly illegal." He pointed at one of the many recent solar-powered government posters, slapped on the damp cement face of a bridge support, as it cycled through the words: "GOD/asks that you FEAR/him/the COMMISSION/ask ONLY/that you LOVE/them."

"Personally," said the older man, "I feel the churches should never have meddled in secular affairs. Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's; if the Commission want to behave like early Roman emperors, let us behave like early Roman Christians."

"The Commission," said Luc hotly, "were attempting to rig the voting system for the entire European Union. The

churches were the only organizations who could have spoken out against them, even if that does mean Organized Religion is now illegal... speaking of churches, where's yours?"

The man in the parka looked embarrassed. "Well, I'm afraid I considered things would be simple enough here for the sort of preaching Jesus originally indulged in to be possible – just a simple gathering in the open air, no PA system, no holographic flying angels, no overhead projector –"

Luc was appalled. "No holographic flying angels?"

"Yes, I'm afraid I was that naïve. I'm afraid half the locals consider me some sort of upstart because I don't have a decent rusty caravan to preach in."

Luc settled down wearily on top of a bald tyre. "I suppose you realize you're just turning the voting public against the refugees by pushing God to them?"

The other man was obstinate. "It is the State that is turning its citizens against God. I have no part in it."

Luc shrugged. "Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the law, Monsignor."

The beardy man held up an admonitory finger. "*Love God, and do what thou wilt, my son.*" He turned to a Refu woman who had fallen to her knees in front of him. She pulled open her jacket to reveal one white breast, onto which was tattooed a stylized blue fish in the shape of a Greek letter alpha. Cahill laid his hand upon her radioactively alopoeciac head and pronounced a Latin blessing. Hairs came off on his palm as he made the sign of the cross and moved on into the crowd.

"Well, you weren't using the land!"

"I am an organic farmer. It is necessary for my fields to lie fallow." The man didn't sound like a horny-handed son of the sod. He'd probably made his money in internet banking and settled down to play at agriculture. Now he was probably regretting it. Overnight, seven rows of rather poorly-planted cash crops had appeared on the part of his land closest to Gordium Junction, along with a small teepee village and a hippy market garden. Luc had come to the market garden to try and supplement his diet with vitamin-rich potatoes, or at the very least green veg. Now he was standing at the back of a crowd of non-plussed hippies who were marvelling open-mouthed at the fact that a farmer was objecting to them turning his land into an allotment.

"Well, while the field's lying fallow, surely we can plant some crops in it," said a magenta-haired mass of body piercings which Luc suspected might be female inside its outer covering of ironmongery. The farmer, a short, bearded man, almost died of apoplexy on the spot. "But then it wouldn't be *FALLOW!*" he squeaked, gesticulating in frustration with his gun (which, luckily, he had made safe).

The mass of body piercings moved closer to him with horrid reassuring body language, talking slowly, understandingly and soul-suckingly. *I feel your pain, but first you must walk a mile in my moccasins, fellow starchild.* "Look, we understand your need to farm organically. Surely you can give us that opportunity too?"

And he made the weapon dangerous and shot her, sending tiny flecks of her blood all over Luc's glasses, giv-

ing her that one last body piercing that broke the camel's back. Before anyone could close on him, he stepped back, raised the gun to his eye and swept it across the crowd.

"Get off my land. Get off my land or I so help me I will kill you all."

"Motherfucker," said a Refu voice in disbelief.

"You *Pagan Christian scum,*" countered the farmer, rather confusingly. But, Luc concluded, he was right. The market gardeners were plastered in so many different religious symbols – ankhs, Stars of David, crucifixes, yin-yang symbols, tiny grinning pewter Buddhas – that it would have been difficult to tell what they believed in. But Luc knew what they believed in, and in a nutshell, it would have been *something better than this.*

*Hang on. How many organic farmers carry firearms?*

Luc had seen weapons like this before, in the hands of the vigilante patrols that weeded out Christians in the cities, stopping every car with a fish on the bumper. It was not a farmer's weapon. It had not been made by a gunsmith. There was no blue steel or lovingly beeswaxed walnut. It looked as though it had been pressed together on an assembly line. The stock was a folding steel skeleton. Blobs of flash were visible round the edges of the receiver. There was no magazine. There didn't need to be. A single rotating sleeve held a propellant cartridge at one end of the weapon, and whatever junk happened to be lying around was shovelled into a big wide smoothbore barrel at the other. Lead shot. Broken glass. Steel wire. Luc had no idea where the weapons were made, but they all seemed to follow the same basic design. Whatever came out of the gun would not come out in a decent honest straight line. It would come out in a cone. Luc began calculating the edges of the cone, realized he was probably in it, and started to edge away discreetly. As he edged away discreetly, the farmer realized comically that his gun was now empty, broke it, slapped another round into its chamber, closed it, dove his hand into his pocket and shook out what looked like a fistful of masonry nails into the gun muzzle.

"YOU CAN'T RELOAD IN TIME IF WE ALL RUSH YOU!" said a Refu, probably truthfully, but still unwisely, as someone who wasn't the farmer then shot him at close range out of a nearby hedge. The shot must have contained a length of wire, as it flayed his face from his head. Luc dived for the warm muddy embrace of Mother Earth, just before shots started coming in from all directions. *Ambush.*

Up above Luc, there were screams, the sound of running feet, the sound of people falling over and shouting "Help!" and "Bastard!" and "Mother!" Luc kept his face firmly pressed against the dirt, trying not to listen, but hearing every single ricochet that bounced close to his ears. Every ricochet, he knew, probably contained 20 or so individual projectiles. *Where do these guns come from?*

Eventually, mercifully, the shooting stopped. Luc tasted blood down one side of his face – something must have hit him. He hoped he hadn't been hit in the brain. He remembered reading somewhere that the brain had no pain nerves.

Now there was another sort of footsteps – self-assured, purposeful, but still wary.

"*Did we gedallorrem?*" said a voice.

"Looks like it. Chuffin god-botherers."

"Chuffin god-botherers do allt bloody bad stuff int world," said someone, cocking his firearm. Probably the leader, thought Luc. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught a glimpse of a white armband, well-made of good material, on a sleeve made of ragged neon polyester. There were three lions on the armband. "*'t bloody Catholics wi't Spanish Armada, 't bloody Christians wi't Witch Burning, 't bloody Moslems wi' September Eleventh. 't bloody Mormons.*" What evil it was the Mormons were supposed to be responsible for, the leader did not elucidate, though Luc suspected it might be Little Jimmy Osmond and was actually with the leader on that one.

"Aye," said someone, spitting with venom. "*'t bloody Mormons.*"

"Aye, well," continued the leader. "*Our sort'll win out int end, cos we int afraid o Death. At'sy only reason fer Religion. Fear o Death.*"

"*A've ad my time on Earth,*" said one sorrowful voice. "*A wanna be sad to leave it.*"

"*Not the bastard way things are reyt now,*" said another.

"Aye, well," said the leader, perhaps a little disgruntled with the turn his team's morale was taking, "*let's mek sure dey leave before we do, eh?*"

Luc heard the farmer's voice, slightly closer, nervous. "You're sure they won't come back? I mean, there's only me and my wife at home, and she can't handle a gun."

The leader sounded unconcerned. "*Nah. Dey've been learned dey lesson. If da needs us, will be deer, no problem. Right now we've a church to burn over in Bakewell.*"

Luc stayed quiet, in case it was a trick, as the most incompetent death squad in the history of the world departed.

"What is it?" said Wills.

"A parachute. It came down and snagged on that tree there. And that's a packing crate."

For some reason, a spectacular variety of crinodendron, the Chilean Lantern Tree, seemed to flourish in the evil acid soil that now covered most of Northern England; now that no weeding or town planning was taking place, the Lantern Tree, along with brackens, buddleia, rhododendra, and surreal fields of Himalayan Blue Poppies, was fast becoming the predominant flora. It had just rained, and this particular tree was brown as a bog brush with low-grade coal dust. Only a kilometre away, the sub-surface-burning power towers at Rotherham were belching out dioxides, and the sky was weeping down acid indigestion on the world. Like most Refu's, Luc and Cahill were wearing fertilizer bags with head and arm holes cut into them to protect them from the elements.

"But it's empty," said Wills. Wills had been named, patriotically, after the last King of England, but his parents had not known Wills was short for anything. "And we're on the edge of Rotherham here. The Townies've got all the food and money they need already. Who'd drop an aid parcel on them?"

Luc looked the crate over carefully. "Someone who's trying to make sure the Townies *hang on* to all that food and fuel and money. This isn't aid from overseas. It's a

munitions crate. Now we know where all those bargain-bucket blunderbusses are coming from." He picked up a piece of red-and-white fabric. "And the armbands too."

"So they're losing the war with the churches," said Wills.

"Sometimes," said Luc, "for someone who has lived for only 14 years, and spent all of those in Gordium, you are most perspicacious, Mr Naylor." He picked up a handful of discarded propaganda leaflets. "Have you noticed how they always leave the leaflets that don't have graphic pictures of Democracy being raped by evil Christians, Moslems, Americans, Fenians and Communists?"

"The old uns used to be cartoons, rather than photos," mused Wills. "D'you think they actually raped real actresses?" He mused a bit more. "How can they be losing if they're the ones with all the guns?"

"They're having to drop the guns from aeroplanes, Wills. That means they aren't in control of the roads any more."

"That's cause the Americans have landed in Glasgow and Liverpool."

Luc picked off another object out of the higher branches. "Speaking of Americans, what's the odds of two air-dropped propaganda objects hitting the same tree?" He wiped a thin coating of grime off the object's solar panel, and it immediately activated, yelling "HI! THIS IS YOUR EARLY MORNING FREE WORLD NEWS! AREAS OF ENGLAND THAT HAVE BEEN FREED TODAY INCLUDE MACK LEZZFIELD, WRECKS HAM, AND KLAN GOCKLEN. STAY TUNED FOR NEWS OF HOW SOON YOU MAY BE FREED!"

"Not too low, these days, I should imagine," said a voice from the bottom of the tree. "Only this morning a little kid was killed in Gordium by a falling clockwork radio. The Americans won't be here in a hurry, in any case. They're probably too busy securing vital oil fields in the North Sea."

"Good morning, Father Cahill," said Luc. Wills fell silent. Luc was not supposed to openly identify Cahill as a Man of God.

"Can you see the pagan assembly from up there?"

"I can indeed. They look like they're having more fun than Christians, that's for certain."

Cahill frowned disapprovingly. "Having indiscriminate sex, no doubt."

"That says a great deal about your Catholic preconceptions. They're doing some sort of country dancing, and there is a juggler, and mime artists."

"I thought you said they were having fun."

"I said *more fun than Christians*. I did not say actual fun was involved. They are gathering around their church of pagan evil."

"What does the den of iniquity look like?"

"It has smily happy faces painted on the outside, and also many flowers and gaily cavorting clowns."

Below Luc at the foot of the tree, the Monsignor shuddered. "Is the false prophet present?"

"Not yet. I believe he's quite a little guy, with fewer horns and hooves than you'd expect. He's been living here a while, you know."

The main central traffic island at the middle of Gordium Junction was over 200 metres in diameter. Originally intended to allow four five-lane motorways to intercon-

nect without deviating from a dead straight course, the island had almost certainly been the most heavily forested part of South Yorkshire before the inhabitants of Gordium began to fell the trees for firewood. Now there were massive gaps in the forest cover, and Luc could see the rusted wrecks of cars with designs over 20 years old buried in the underbrush. They had probably collided with the island years earlier, and simply been pushed into the bushes by maintenance gangs who couldn't be bothered to put cones up and tow them away. Luc recognized a Smart&Sexy, a Vauxhall Sphinctera and (with some satisfaction) a Ferrari Malatesta that appeared to have landed upside down in a tree and burst into flames.

A long time ago, a little old man had lived in a council house here back when this had all been a part of the Greater Sheffield Metropolitan Area. All the houses around him had been compulsorily purchased by the authorities to make way for the expressway, but the old man had stubbornly refused to move, until eventually the powers that be had yielded to the inevitable, shifted their design a millimetre to the left on the map, and built the expressway all around his house.

The old man had lived, he said, in his house for over 40 years, and would live there "until he left to Goo Upsteers." This enigmatic statement had always been taken to mean that the old buffer was going to remain in the house until he died, but recently, a hubbub had been caused by him suddenly announcing that he would be leaving to Goo Upsteers shortly. He was widely considered to be a *saddhu* by Gordium's Asian community who imagined that anyone sufficiently old, reclusive and mad must therefore be holy. The word *saddhu* had crossed shakily into English, and the remainder of Gordium's community now referred to the oldster as The Saddo.

"What's he been living on in that place for 20 years, in any case?" said the Monsignor.

"Dunno," said Luc. "I suppose he more or less had the run of the whole island. Seems to have turned a couple of big bits close to the house into vegetable patches. Funny thing," he said, "no one seems to have dug them up and stolen the veg. Maybe he injects every tenth carrot with cyanide or something." He squinted through the foliage. "The painted stuff is all on a sort of fence of billboards surrounding the house. There are men standing all around the fence stopping people getting in; they can only get in through a gate at the front. People are being checked for weapons."

"Is there anything inside the fence?" said Wills.

Luc edged out along the branch, and pulled some twigs aside, then stared in amazement.

"What is it?" said Wills. "Let me up, I want to see."

"It's a spaceship," said Luc.

The spaceship was clearly identifiable as a spaceship, because it had SPACE SHIP written on it in big letters. It also had stars and moons and planets, and the words SYSA, which were explained, in smaller letters, to be an acronym for SOUTH YORKSHIRE SPACE AGENCY. The ship, however, seemed to be quite professionally made. Aviation rivets had been employed in its construction. But the flight

crew appeared to sit in a plastic bubble without any visible protection against gamma radiation, re-entry heat or micrometeoroids, there were no visible control surfaces, fuel tank, or propulsion system, and the whole thing resembled nothing so much as a fairground flying saucer. It rested on five stalklike feet. It even had a rather shabbily-chromed access ramp which looked to contain a tiny escalator. It was, however, surprisingly immense. Luc marvelled that its builders had been able to find enough steel to build it, until he realized where he was.

"How could they build a spaceship?" scoffed the Monsignor.

Luc shrugged. "Sheffield used to be the centre of the British metal industry. There are old men here who were welding aluminium on their first day out of school. There are abandoned factories a short walk from here with great lumps of titanium lying around like swarf. I did a feature on them only a year ago, before Munich and Portsmouth ate nukes. I was on the outskirts of, erm, Munich when it went up," he added hurriedly.

"Ah, so you're a journalist, then," said Cahill quickly.

"I may have been," said Luc. He looked down the tree. "You seem to be taking this spaceship thing very seriously."

"It's taking away my punters. If this keeps up, I may need to build a spaceship of my own."

The devout believers were now gathering inside the fence in front of the bizarre device, dressed in NBC gear, Anne Summers bondage respirators, bacofail, anything that might remotely resemble a space suit. They were banging home-made drums and tambourines, and chanting in time to their banging: "UP-STEERS! UP-STEERS! UP-STEERS!" and "SAAAD-O! SAAAD-O! SAAAD-O!" Luc noticed that a small stage, also covered in stars and moons, had been erected in front of the multitude.

Then a little man, so small as to be barely human, was pushed on stage in a wheelchair by two huge attendants, and the crowd went wild. The little man, dressed like many an elderly gent in faded Nike sportswear, smiled indulgently and waved to the crowd with a hand so frail it looked like a scrap of paper wafting in the breeze.

Then he was propelled up to a microphone at the front of the stage, and the crowd went silent. Luc heard the tree branch wheezing in the wind and remembered, for the first time in minutes, that he was literally out on a limb.

"Friends," came a voice sounding as if it might have been squeezed out of a supermarket chicken clenched under someone's armpit. "I am so very, very gratified to see you all here today. Our work here is nearly at an end. Most of you will have seen by now how the civilization we have built on this planet is approaching its end. We have been warned of this end by travellers from the Future, who returned back to spread news of it through Nostradamus, St John the Divine, and Madame Blavatsky. They have come to warn us so that we may build a Future in which they exist. And we will succeed in that enterprise, my dear friends – for the very existence of those who warned us proves that, in the future, they exist, and will come back to warn us, which proves that they exist.

"We will leave this tired world to begin a new future on the Planet Venus, which is not nearly as acidic and vio-



lently hot and capable of squeezing a man's eyeballs from his head as government propaganda would have us believe. No, the Americans have been terraforming it for many years, so that only their own intelligentsia will have a place in the Promised Land. But now their state is falling apart, and their secret rocket projects lie abandoned in the deserts. We alone will inherit this new land – we, with my patent Ogden Nucleophonic Drive, which works on turbulent gravitoelectronic principles to counter-neutralize the Earth's etheric mass."

The crowd gave a rousing scurvy cheer.

"You must bring your families, here, to this place; two children per family, no more. Bring also samples of the flora and fauna of this country, for we will recreate in the Ishtar Terra of Venus the woodlands of Old England. Bring ye of the oak, of the silver birch, of the squirrel, of the nuthatch, of the badger. But only squirrels of the red variety, if these can be found, for squirrels of the grey variety pollute the pure British blood of the squirrel race. And bring ye even of the nettle, yes – for nettles can be made into a most nutritious soup. But not of the dandelion, for it is a most pernicious weed. As Venus may be somewhat warmer than Earth, vines of the grape, banana plants, and marijuana may be permitted."

The crowd were still cheering. It could not be possible that they were still listening.

"Are they *believing* this?" came Cahill's voice from the bottom of the tree.

"If people *want* to believe," said Luc, "they'll believe anything you tell them. And these people want to believe in something better than this. And not something better *if they're good, after they're dead*. They need their salvation in the here and now, without preconditions. They're starving, and their children are dying of diseases they know their parents went to a GP and got prescribed antibiotics for. That's why your religion's failing and his isn't, Monsignor."

"Are you saying it isn't true, then?" said Wills, sounding worried.

Luc carried on watching. The old man had a couple of mysterious bundles of mouldy velvet on either side of him. He reached down to them, and the crowd fell silent. This was the moment, it appeared, that they had all been waiting for – the Eucharist, the *Sanctus Sanctorum*, the Grand Finale.

Underneath the velvet were a couple of rather large, hubcap-shaped objects, each about the size of a washing-up bowl, but made of steel. At the hub of each object, right on top, was a brass ring large enough to accept a thumb or finger. The old man put a forefinger and thumb through the ring of one object, struggled it clear of the ground with a feeble hand, let it go; it dropped back down onto the stage with a THUMP, and bit into the wood. He did the same with the other. The message was clear; his hubcaps were very heavy.

Then, the old man reached around the back of each device, and operated a set of buttons. Almost immediately, the upper surfaces of the devices began to revolve. At the same time, hidden tinny speakers began playing lilty hippy moon music, and the crowd began to sway gently

and coo like a dovecote full of homing pigeons.

The rate of revolution of the devices increased, and they raised themselves up off the dais until they were spinning on single metal cones at their hubs. The old man hooked his little finger through the ring on one of the devices, and it rose easily from the stage. He hooked his other little finger round the other, and it, too, rose. Smiling beatifically, he began to swing them round his head like a cheerleader with a pair of pom-poms. A pair of pom-poms, Luc imagined, that probably weighed at least 20 pounds apiece. The crowd – and, Luc realized, himself – were staring in, in the case of Luc, shocked disbelief, and in the case of the crowd, tranquil 100% belief, at the scrawny little prophet.

Luc came down out of the tree before he started to go the same way as the audience. He turned to Cahill.

"You've got some serious competition there," he said.

"Can you smell burning?" came Wills's voice, softly, from the back of the Land Rover.

This was the third time Luc had heard this said that night. Fire was a pressing concern in Gordium, which had not been built according to government safety regulations. But the amount of flammable plastics in its construction went down with every passing day; the arrival of environmentally friendly packaging now meant that a tramp could no longer rely on having a roof over his head that wouldn't biodegrade by morning. The situation had grown so bad that homeless families had been known to excavate landfills to obtain polythene sheeting from before the Age of Greenness.

"Can't see smoke," said Luc. "Must be a cooking fire." From the direction of Monsignor Cahill's Midnight Mass on the sliproad to Hope (and Castleton), he could see electric light. Cahill must have acquired a power source from somewhere.

"Doesn't smell like cooking," said Wills. "Smells like burning."

"It won't spread anyway, even if the whole camp's on fire. It's been raining all night." *Raining unburnt coal sludge*, he reminded himself. When the sun came out and the rain dried, the mixture was often not only flammable, but explosive.

"It's *always* raining all night," whispered Wills.

"It's the soot residue in the atmosphere from the power towers. Water droplets form around it."

"It's not fair that you guys know stuff like that," said Wills. "They still had schools when you were little." He interrupted the conversation to talk into his headset. "Good morning, caller, you're through to Accident and Emergency, what service do you require?" Behind Wills's voice, a backing chorus of "Kumbaya, My Lord" cut through the night. Cahill had evidently despaired of trying to teach Gregorian chants to his flock and had started on something a little more vernacular.

Luc turned over on his bunk in the front seat of the Land Rover and tried to sleep. Two cars further down, he heard a voice saying "*Guten Morgen, lieber Kunde. Daimler Chrysler bedankt Ihnen für Ihre Interesse für unsere Produktlinie...*" It was hard getting a good night's sleep

in the Call Centre Clan.

"Will you require cutting out of the vehicle, sir?" said Wills. Luc scrambled out of his bed and slammed the driver door behind him. He could smell burning. Incense – probably Cahill's – but also burning. The smell of a coal fire crackling merrily in the grate.

It seemed warm, almost like a summer day, despite the fact that he knew the air was bitterly cold. Luc wondered whether he was coming down with something. He felt he could walk to Cahill's congregation barefoot.

When he arrived at the site of Cahill's simple open-air service, he could hardly believe his eyes.

A church had been made, ingeniously, by shifting parked vehicles into the shape of a cross. An aisle, a metal canyon, had been made between two rows of curtain-siders, and the canvas on those trailers had been replaced with auto glass of a myriad different colours – police-siren blue, roadside-recovery yellow, boy-racer-headlight purple, and the very rare doctor's-siren green – in imitation of stained glass. The aisle had been terminated with a transept by turning a double-decker bus side on and sticking transparent images of saints and angels onto the insides of its windows. There was a pulpit, made of an old railway Permaquip lift. There was an altar made of a car trailer. There were bus seats welded into pews, each row of seats the choice back one the hard kids always sat in on the way to school, outrageously expensive in Gordium terms. The whole thing must have cost a shanty-town fortune.

The pews were filled with worshippers, waving their hands like weeds in an underwater current. At the moment they seemed to be Letting Their Little Light Shine All Over the World. At the front, on a raised dais made of a side-on flatbed truck, some sort of Eucharist was in progress. Worshippers filed towards the Communion wine with fidgety, crazy-eyed expressions, and filed away from it full of the bliss of Christ.

Cahill appeared shocked at seeing Luc. "Mr Jonah. Why aren't you in bed in the Dormitory?"

Luc was nonplussed. "I would have thought you'd be glad of the extra business. Can you smell burning?"

"Don't tell me *you've* had a sudden crisis of faith. THE BODY OF CHRIST."

"No. A sudden attack of indigestion." Luc scooped a precious packet of bicarbonate of soda out of the medicine tin in his pocket and laid it on his tongue. Factory-made bicarbonate was expensive, but the agony that Gordium curry inflicted on his gut demanded it. "The Body of Alka Seltzer."

"Don't be irreverent, Mr Jonah, this is a motorway slip-road of God. Tread on it carefully, for it is Jacob's ladder leading right up THE BODY OF CHRIST to Heaven. I believe I have some sleeping pills in THE BODY OF CHRIST my cell."

Sleeping pills cost ten times the price of Alka Seltzer. Luc was suspicious. "Your cell is a Wembando coupé in the slow lane. Why are you so anxious to deny me Holy Communion? Surely your flock wouldn't like to hear that you'd deny a man access to the Body and Blood?"

"My flock do not listen keenly THE BODY OF CHRIST to every word I say, eager though they are to be penetrated by THE BODY OF CHRIST the Word of God. I do believe that

they would cheerfully defecate on THE BODY OF CHRIST purely in order to get hold of a dram of His divine Blood. THE BODY OF CHRIST or a doggy biscuit, it is all the same to them. Beg, Rover, there's a good boy THE BODY OF CHRIST."

Luc suddenly noticed a number of Gordium residents walking purposefully down the aisle towards him. This in itself was wrong. Gordium residents did not walk purposefully. They slouched and loitered with intent.

"That'll be the people you sent to where I was supposed to be in bed in the Dormitory," said Luc. "Am I right?"

"Really, you do concoct such fantasies THE BODY OF CHRIST."

"I knew you'd gone Anglo-Catholic when I heard the clapping and the tambourine," said Luc. "Did they supply you with whatever you've been putting in the Communion wine?"

"I was taken in by the God Crimes Unit a week ago," confessed Cahill. "They agreed to drop charges if I co-operated. THE BODY OF CHRIST I've undertaken to bring my congregation into the C of E as a logical first step towards atheism. THE BODY OF CHRIST I am sorry, but this is the only way I can continue to operate a church at all. THE BODY OF CHRIST In any case, the Communion Wine becomes the Blood of Christ THE BODY OF CHRIST as soon as it touches their lips," said Cahill. "Therefore theologically there is no problem with lacing it with methadone, and the police let me have as much of that THE BODY OF CHRIST as I want."

"I claim sanctuary," said Luc. "This is, technically, a church."

Cahill licked his lips uncertainly.

"Damn," he said. "Technically, you're right." He pulled out a pistol from under his cassock and slapped a magazine into it. "Tell you what, I won't start shooting till you get *ex cathedra*."

Luc jumped off the dais and ran. Unfortunately, Cahill ran at his heels. Luc turned and looked at him indignantly. Cahill shrugged. "I never said I wasn't going to follow you," he said.

Luc turned and smashed Cahill in the nose. "I never said I wasn't going to hit you," he said. Although about to also kick the prone churchman in the groin, he was forced to leap about like a Namib desert lizard as his bare feet suddenly burned on the tarmac. He hopped on one foot whilst examining the sole of the other. Molten asphalt was sticking to his toes. Cahill also yelped and leapt up off the ground, nursing a burn where his bare arm had touched the road.

"This," said Luc, "cannot be right."

Cahill looked up, met his gaze, and nodded in amazement. He seemed to have forgotten all about shooting Luc.

The tar of the road was steaming. Luc was uncomfortably aware that it was flammable. It might also, he thought with alarm, be giving off chemicals that might be carcinogenic. A bullet sang off the side of a car next to his ear. He began running again.

As he passed a Volkswagen on the right-hand side, it vanished into the ground, which belched a hot black cloud of

choking dust as it swallowed the car. Luc left the road in alarm and was about to vault over the crash barrier down onto another. Unfortunately, there was no other road there. Instead, a furnace blast of heat hit him full in the face, together with smoke that seared his lungs.

He could not look over the crash barrier. It hurt his eyes to open them fully. Whatever was down there was red, and hot, and huge, and further down than it really should be. Whatever was down there and *human* was almost certainly dead.

He looked back along the road. His pursuers – three of them – had lost interest in him, and were gaping dumbfounded over the crash barrier just as he was. He took to his heels again, but moved to the fast lane to put as much heavy metal between himself and the enemy as possible. He heard the crash barrier crumble into the gulf behind him. With luck, it had taken one or two of them with it.

Could it be volcanic activity? Britain wasn't on any tectonic boundary, was it? He dimly remembered that many rock formations in western Britain and Ireland were volcanic. There must have been a plate boundary here once, in that case. Maybe the direction of movement of the continents had drastically reversed. Maybe Europe was now sliding towards North America and Italy was pulling clear of Europe. God only knew the nuclear weapons going off on the San Andreas since 2020 had already sufficed to make California an island just as 16th-century cartographers had wanted it.

In front of him, a double-decker bus was sliding backwards down the road, into a black thunderhead out of which sparks were flying like hail. The centre of the cloud was not black, however, but glowed a dull red, like a steam train coming out of a tunnel. Luc left the road again; this time, his feet came down on tarmac. He was running downhill, on one of the access roads to the old M1, he thought; and the road did not now appear to be tilting or crumbling in any way. Having bare feet was painful, but also useful; he could feel which parts of the tarmac were cooler.

Someone took a potshot at him from behind; either that, or some volcanic fissure was spitting out lava bombs. But he was running with other people now, among cars, and it was going to be far more difficult to draw a bead on him. He was dimly aware that the people he was running with seemed far better prepared for disaster than he was. They had had time to snatch up their children and gather bundles of clothing, cans of food, squirrels. Luc was certain he saw at least one man carrying a squirrel, very carefully, in case he dropped it.

He realized all of a sudden where the crowd was headed.

The saucer was huge when seen from ground level, and impressively illuminated. Liquid-crystal bill posters surrounded it, advertising a local Gordian loan syndicate. Gigantic magenta letters announced YOU TOO CAN LIVE IN THE TRAILER OF YOUR DREAMS. Smaller, more discreet letters above this announced:

THE TIME HAS COME!

THE END AND THE BEGINNING ARE NIGH!

People were streaming up towards the tiny crack in the fence. Many more doormen were in evidence than usual.

Couples with more than two children were being turned away, despite the sobbing protestations of the mothers. Luc saw at least one family calmly assessing the relative merits of their various offspring, then picking up one or more bemused infant, carrying them out of the queue, and leaving them in the crowd before they continued on into the saucer citadel. Luc noticed in passing that many men in the outer crowd seemed to be taller and more heavily built than was normally the case at the Saddo's gatherings, and were carrying long wrapped bundles of what looked like tools. Luc imagined they must be farm labourers.

The great starship was venting what Luc was almost certain was dry ice, flowing up over the saucer shape and streaming into the sky like water. (But it couldn't be dry ice, could it? Carbon dioxide would flow downhill, not up).

In front of the saucer, the stage was still in place and the little old Saddo sitting behind his microphone, the amplification on his voice cranked up to feedback-screaming levels to make him heard over the rumble and hiss coming from the roadway.

"Children of England," came the tiny tinny voice, "it is time to cross the wastes of space and make our homes anew. Embark, please, in an orderly fashion without pushing, remembering to keep hold of small children who cannot reach the ceiling straps. Standing room only please. If you have not been to the lavatory before takeoff, there is an outside toilet behind the house. Please wipe parsimoniously, as there is a limited supply of toilet paper."

Luc noticed that the farm labourers did not seem to be getting into the saucer. In fact, they didn't even seem to be trying. Rather, they were hanging around on the outside of the crowd, and some of them seemed to be unwrapping their bundles.

"Those of you who are wearing your patented anti-cosmic-ray helmets, please switch them off during take-off and landing as they may interfere with the vessel's Tachyonic Drive..."

The last time the vessel's drive system had been mentioned, Luc recalled, it had been called "gravitoelectronic," not "tachyonic." He also noticed that the farm labourers' bundles were proving to contain things which suggested they were not farm labourers at all. Fencing mauls and muckrakes very seldom came with laser sights. He also noticed that each and every labourer, now they had removed their coats, was wearing an armband with three lions rampant.

Then a new voice opened up over the hiss and crackle of the Sadducees' superannuated PA system.

"THIS IS THE VOICE OF THE DEMOCRATICALLY ELECTED GOVERNMENT OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND. YOU ARE RESPECTFULLY AND CORDIALLY REMINDED THAT BY DECREE OF THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION APRIL 12, 2045, THERE IS NO GOD. YOU WILL PLEASE DISPERSE IN AN ORDERLY FASHION. THIS IS THE VOICE OF THE DEMOCRATICALLY ELECTED GOVERNMENT OF..."

But the crowd, to Luc's immense surprise, refused to disperse. Some of them also appeared to have sprouted firearms of their own. Gordium, like most shanty towns, had its own metal shops, which could bore a hole in a barrel just as easily as a cylinder head.

The voice of the Saddo implored the crowd over the loudspeakers: "Stop! I beseech you! What are you doing, bringing weapons to our gathering? Is it not enough for you to have to live with these vile implements on this horrid world, that you have to take them with us into our pastures new? Cast them aside, and our accusers will find they do not have the heart to fire on an unarmed man!"

Luc admired the old man's goodness of heart, but did not share his views on the relationships between armed and unarmed men. Meanwhile, as he watched, ominous ruddy cracks streaked through the tarmac towards the roundabout, dividing the crowd even further. The first shot he heard might not have been a shot at all, but the sound of some lump of volcanic debris spat into the air by subterranean magmatism. But the second and third shots, and almost every single one of the subsequent ones, were real.

People in the crowd began falling – it was difficult to tell when this was from gunfire, and when from the ground opening and swallowing them up. Huge rips in the fabric of the earth were opening up, revealing a bright red glowing lining like the inside of the Earl of Hell's waistcoat, and people were falling into those awful abysses. Luc saw a tree topple sideways and go over, and saw the brief bright flare as it combusted. Up above him on the roundabout, the side of the Saddo's house crumbled into where its foundations had once been. There was a smell of a jolly hearth and a roaring coal fire. The Sadducees were scrambling to get aboard their saucer, pushing and shoving on the escalator, which was not moving with the weight of people on it. As government shots picked off people trying to get into the vehicle, their bodies were hurled from the access ramp by others taking their place.

"Stop this madness! Do not fight! There is room on the Ark for all!"

Eventually, the Saddo's bodyguards took charge of the situation and, lifting all four corners of his wheelchair clear of the ground, bundled him through the mob to a particular location underneath the saucer's hull, where one of them operated a hand-held radio device. A portion of the hull slid aside, extruding a tiny service lift in which the Saddo was carefully packed and made to ascend. Then the door in the hull was closed, and the bodyguards set to clearing the faithful from the main access ramp, just as the glistening cracks in the earth reached the landing struts of the saucer. Black smoke was rising from the cracks. It was becoming difficult to breathe.

"DO NOT LEAVE US!" yelled Sadducees from the crowd. "DO NOT DESERT US IN OUR HOUR OF NEED, O MASTER!"

"HE WILL RETURN WHEN THE TIME IS RIGHT," yelled another. "HIS ABSENCE NOW IS BUT FOR A SPACE, SITHEE."

And as Luc watched, the saucer began – perfectly silently, though with appropriately legal landing lights flickering on its upper and lower surface – to lift from the ground. Nobody fired on it – in fact, nobody fired on anybody any more, as all eyes, even those eyes whose owners were in danger of being tipped into the pit all round them, were now fixed on the giant hubcap rising into the sky.

Luc became uncomfortably aware that the palms of his hands were melting.

The pain shocked him into action, and he ran for the

other side of the roundabout as those cars around him which still contained petrol began exploding. Few people were shooting now – most were only trying to stay alive. The vegetation on what remained of the roundabout was crackling merrily, and Luc felt that if he didn't get away from the roundabout soon, he, too, would be crackling.

He managed to win through to the house, which was mostly collapsed now. As he reached it, he saw rooms, open to the sky now that its side walls and roof had been stripped away, which had once been fit for human habitation, but which were now filled with bizarre devices, heaps of spare parts, rows of carefully labelled tools. On one wall, he saw a photograph of a group of smiling men, all in their 40s and 50s, with the caption, ÉQUIPE DÉVELOPPEMENT THÉORETIQUE, PROJET CONTRE-GRAVITIQUE Cie EUROSPATIALE. One of the faces in the group was clearly the Saddo's.

"GIRAUD!"

He turned, and his heart sank as he realized his pursuers had not given up. Instead, they were running towards him up the slope from the edge of the roundabout, guns in their fists. In the vain hope that this might convince them not to shoot him, he raised his hands.

And then they began running on the spot, and then sliding backwards, as the whole section of earth they were pelting up began pelting downwards, like a big green fur rug being pulled out from under their feet. Then the green turf became lumps of tumbling mud as the ground surface disintegrated, and Luc saw a deep ruby maw open in the earth into which that rubble drained, hissing as every scrap of water in it evaporated with the heat. He never even heard a scream.

He was coughing from smoke and soot now, and the traffic island was surrounded on all four quarters by canyons of flame too wide to jump. But the edges of the canyons were the only place a man could breathe. Higher up the island, where he was less likely to burn alive, he would asphyxiate.

All around him, concrete road surfaces were collapsing like waves breaking in a tempest. In front of him, a road motored downward into fiery oblivion, indicated by a cock-eyed sign reading FOR EARTH CENTRE FOLLOW M1 whose arrow now pointed almost vertically down. The sign mystified him. Did it really mean that the Earth's Centre lay at the end of the old M1? He was certain he remembered the M1 ended at Tarshish. He held on to the sign to steady himself. It felt red hot. The paint was blistering. But here, at least, there was something firmly anchored to hold on to. Something that, unlike a bush or tree, wouldn't be ripped from the ground by the firestorm. He wrapped his many layers of clothes around the metal, keeping them between it and his skin. They steamed. He felt sleepy.

When he woke up, the sun was rising, and it was raining slag.

Grey, heavy lumps of a porridge consistency covered the landscape with a wintry blanket. Luc felt an immense sense of unfairness that it was so cold. The rain had been caused by all the hot soot in the air – surely it should come down warm?



Granted, there were still parts of the landscape it was hissing on when it hit.

There were still people outside who weren't dead, though they were probably outnumbered by those who were. Asphyxiation appeared to have killed most people; most of the bodies seemed to have hardly a blemish. There were, of course, also odd bodies that were terribly burned and blackened, though most of these also bore evidence of gunshot wounds. There was also the occasional hapless corpse stuck under a toppled telegraph pole or tree or *TOO FAST today DEAD tomorrow?* sign.

One of the people who wasn't dead recognized Luc and hurried towards him.

"It was a nuke," said the undead person proudly. "My first nuke. I'll probably get radiation alopecia now and my hair'll drop out. Grandad says that's a sign you're more virile."

"It wasn't a nuke, Wills," said Luc.

"It were an earthquake," said a nearby heap of mud, which proved to be a human being sheltering in a cone of polythene.

"It wasn't an earthquake either," said Luc. "Earthquakes don't happen in England. It was just coal, that's all. Coal burning underground. It happened in Pennsylvania in the last century. Once a coal seam catches fire below the surface, if it can find enough air to breathe, it can burn for years. Some of the fires that caught last century in the States are still smouldering now. Whole towns vanished into them. There are photos of houses perched on the edge of great black pits in the earth. And what have the power

companies been doing in England for the last 20 years? Sinking church-tower-sized turbines into the rock and injecting uneconomical, low-grade coal seams underneath with liquid oxygen to deliberately set them alight. Cheaper than coalmining, after all. The power comes out untouched by human hand. *Nothing* can go wrong."

A drop of sulphur dioxide rain dropped onto a nearby engine block and produced a cloud of steam. Luc wondered whether this was because the engine block had recently been cooking, or because the rain was now actually able to dissolve metal.

To the south, the power towers that normally burned like pillars of fire over north Derbyshire were dark and slumped over at a variety of unhealthy angles. Chesterfield had three more leaning spires than usual. If, that was, Chesterfield still existed. He realized suddenly that the sun appeared to be rising in three directions at once. At least two of those sunrises had to be flames reflecting off low cloud.

Wills was disgusted. "I'll probably grow up and *never* get nuked," he complained bitterly. "It's all right for you. *You've* been nuked *already*."

**Dominic Green's** previous stories for *Interzone* include "Queen of Hearts" (issue 173), "Blue Water, Grey Death" (issue 175), "News from Hilaria" (issue 179), "Heavy Ice" (issue 187), "The Rule of Terror" (issue 189) and "Send Me a Mentagram" (issue 192). The above new story is a sequel to "The Rule of Terror," although it can be enjoyed without having read the previous tale. Dominic lives in Northampton, and recently crashed his car.

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ART BY DAVID HO

afresh by the poetic quality of some of the titles:

"Our Lady of Springtime"  
"Another Day, Another Dream"  
"The White Dragon Passing"  
"A Tribute to Ferns"  
"The Vasty Deep"  
"Dragons of the Mind"  
"When the Night is Cold (and the Land is Dark)"

They sound like stories that many people, who have yet to discover them, would want to read. But as a writer he was perhaps most notable for his humour. One of my favourites of his stories, among the ten that *Interzone* published, was "The Collectivization of Transylvania" – a yarn set in Romania in the late years of the dictator Ceausescu, in which an earnest young commissar attempts to "collectivize" Dracula's castle and its environs. It may be a horror tale, about vampires, and it may contain some political barbs, but above all it's a genuinely funny story.

Here are some short tributes to Peter which were e-mailed by members of the Mitre Pub group, and a few others, in the days immediately following his sudden death:

Andy Robertson: "This is a terrible shock. I have known Pete since at least 1982 and have liked and trusted him for years. Goodbye, Peter."

Paul Beardsley: "I am saddened by the news. Clare and I knew Pete fairly well. We joined him for dinners at various restaurants, and he gave me some very useful research-advice for a scene in my novel which drew on his experience of working in mental hospitals."

Molly Brown: "I'm so sorry to hear about Peter. He was a lovely man, and I'm going to miss him."

Mike Ashley: "What a loss. Peter was such a fascinating chap, a real fund of knowledge on a wide variety of topics. He did some great stories for my anthologies, in particular 'The Cavalry Charge' in *The Mammoth Book of Sword & Honour* which was a really atmospheric recreation of the Charge of the Light Brigade."

Elizabeth Counihan: "Like everyone I'm shocked and very, very sad about Peter, the founder of the Montpelier Writers Group and one of my best friends."

Paul Brazier: "Pete was unfailingly kind and fair-minded, but possessed of a dry wit that allowed him to express trenchant views inoffensively. As letters editor of *The Argus*, I can't help remembering that Pete didn't turn up at the pub last Friday, but that someone was telling the story of how he nearly got elected as a Liberal councillor because of the number of letters he

wrote to the paper. I was going to ask him about that... Pete loved whales and dolphins and cats and beer and young woman singers and Buffy the Vampire-Slayer and Brighton Festival, and I suspect he was very good at his job. Something tells me he will be profoundly missed."

Larry Matthews: "Sad news indeed about Peter. Like you all, I have fond memories of his dry humour. And it was fun driving with him to a couple of Easter conventions in the North of England and back, with boxes of *Interzone* in the back seat. Pete was unfailing in trying to include people in groups and introduce us around, which was much appreciated. I'm proud to be a member of what I still think of as 'his' writing group, and to have known him during our spell on the planet."

David Rain ("Tom Arden"): "I'm so sorry to hear about Peter. I didn't know him well, but like most people I liked him very much. It's terribly sad."

Maire McQueeney: "What a shock, I was weeping in my tea reading my e-mails today. I knew Peter as a fellow wanderer around Brighton going back some years. I've sent off a tribute letter to the *Argus*. There's not much that would get me to write a letter to the editor."

Andrew Tidmarsh: "I didn't know Pete especially well but I remember that he was a guest when I got married and I had a chat with him about Brighton & Hove Albion in the pub afterwards. He was a big fan. We shall all miss him."

John Nixon (who lives in Sweden): "I've known Pete since the late 1970s. I met him first when he came up to Leeds to speak to the University's sf society. I had no idea what to expect, and my first impression was a bit disappointing, this roly-poly man in his tightly zippered anorak and – was it a knitted cap? An overstuffed suitcase in one hand and an overfull briefcase under the other arm. He didn't look like the big name sf fan and writer I was expecting – more like a school teacher or minor bureaucrat. And he looked middle-aged! I suppose he was 27 or 28, but I was just 20. I think he spoke about fantasy literature, the Arthurian legend, liberalism, whales and cats (a fairly typical spread). As he spoke at the meeting, and more so afterwards, I found myself revising my opinion of him. He was knowledgeable, opinionated, funny, warm, friendly. I liked him a lot. The evening is a little confused in my memory, though. Another member and I were deputed to take him out for food and drinks after his lecture, and we talked (or mostly, I think, Pete talked) and drank till he nearly missed his train home to Brighton. My colleague having either passed out or departed, Pete and I

ended up haring through rain-wet streets down to the central station, me carrying his suitcase, Pete clutching his a half-open briefcase (the catch broke). It was downhill to the station, so we caught the train. I met him on and off after that at conventions, in pubs, and of course followed his authorial career through *Interzone*. I remember meeting him at least once in a Brighton pub in the spring or early summer of 1982, just before I left England. I'm glad I saw Pete one last time in the Mitre when I visited again two years ago. He was larger all around, but he was otherwise unchanged from the figure in my memory."

Nigel Brown: "Not only was Pete a stalwart of the Mitre pub meetings, but he was at the centre of the writing group. He was always generous with his time and willing to help. I shall miss him."

Neil Jones: "Pete was more than a fixture of the Friday evening group, I thought of him as part of its fabric. The first time I ever came, he was there, a published writer, very impressive. That was something like 15 years ago. I came to expect him to turn up in the Mitre fairly late on in proceedings, insist on buying his own drink, and then opining – sagely – on just about any subject under the sun. As well as having a broad range of interests, from King Arthur to *Buffy*, he obviously cared a lot about a lot of things. It feels strange and terribly sad to be using the past tense on all the above."

Deirdre Counihan: "A terrible loss for all of us. I first met Peter at a Lib-Dem Garden Party somewhere near Preston Park in the early 1980s. He was trying not to drop his paper cup and loaded plate as he negotiated some slippery steps and I was trying to do the same but from the opposite direction."

Chris Butler: "I am very sad to hear of Pete's death. I got to know him over the last year or so, firstly through the Mitre pub nights but more so through the Montpelier writers' group. He was kinder to me than he needed to be. He encouraged me to join the group and it was a privilege to hear his comments on the stories we discussed. In more ways than one, there seemed to be more to Pete than you could ever actually take in. He was clearly concerned with politics and social justice, while at the same time being an avid fan of *Buffy* and pop music. Perhaps if I'd had another 20 years or so I might have begun to see the full picture, and I'm sad to be denied the chance to do so."

Gardner Dozois (editor of *Asimov's SF*): "We were all shocked over here to hear of the death of Peter Garratt. He was a good writer, and will be missed."

**David Pringle**

A spectre is haunting the Clarke Award, the spectre of cash-flow... The presentation budget has been slashed by Rocket Publishing. No more money for boozy receptions – only Sir Arthur's personal £2,000-odd for the prize itself. Award administrator Paul Kincaid writes: "Rocket Publishing is the UK representative of Sir Arthur, and has provided all funding for the Award since its inception. I understand that this funding cut is part of wider cutbacks at Rocket Publishing. This news has come out of the blue." But Paul sees "promising options" for maintaining the status quo.

## LORDS OF THE PSYCHON

**Margaret Atwood** reached the six-strong Booker Prize shortlist with her undeniably (except by her) sf novel *Oryx and Crake*. One major firm of UK bookies listed her as favourite, with odds of 2-1.

**Robert Heinlein's** latest memorial is the \$500,000 Heinlein Prize, to be awarded "as frequently as annually" for "practical accomplishments in commercial space activities." The prize trustees stress that "the award is for effort by an individual – not corporate or government sponsored activities – and that the Heinlein Prize is intended to be world-wide in scope."

**Stephen King** won the US National Book Foundation's 2003 "Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters": "This is probably the most exciting thing to happen to me in my career, I'll return the [\$10,000] cash award... the medal I will keep and treasure for the rest of my life." US critic Harold Bloom was swift to imply a comparison of King with Dickens: "He is a man who writes what used to be called penny dreadfuls. That they could believe that there is any literary value there or any aesthetic accomplishment or signs of an inventive human intelligence is simply a testimony to their own idiocy." (*NY Times*) Uproar followed. Perhaps the most restrained comment was Neil Gaiman's measured observation in his weblog: "Harold Bloom is a twerp."

**Mary Shelley** is to be commemorated by a blue English Heritage plaque on the London house where she died – an honour proposed in 1975 but resisted by the vicar living there. He objected to the words "author of *Frankenstein*," presumably for fear of crowds of peasants with torches, and felt that "author(ess) and wife of the poet" would suffice. The news that EH was going ahead with "author of *Frankenstein*" brought renewed protest from the Reverend, arguing that the general public won't know the honour is for the novel rather than all those horrible, tacky films.

## ANSIBLE LINK-1



DAVID LANGFORD

## INFINITELY IMPROBABLE

**Publishers and Sinners.** Long knives at Orion: Anthony Cheetham, Chief Executive, was fired in September and replaced by Peter Roche, while our very own Malcolm Edwards moved into the brand-new post of Deputy Chief Executive and Publisher, with authority to "direct publishing policy across the group." No changes to the Gollancz sf/fantasy imprint are expected.

**As Others See Us.** "All the technology's based on future science fact as opposed to science fiction. We don't know the details of course, but nanotechnology should theoretically be possible, and we could potentially have something like the SoulCatcher chips. It might not be possible for 100 years, but is theoretically possible. I think it's best described as science conjecture as opposed to Science fiction." (Interview with developers of PC game *Hostile Waters*)

**Small Press.** *Postscripts* is a new book-format magazine from Peter Crowther of PS Publishing. £5/\$8 per issue; also a limited, numbered hardback at (ouch) £50/\$80. Hamilton House, 4 Park Ave, Harrogate, HG2 9BQ. This market is currently invitation-only.

**Thog's Nationality Masterclass.** "Terry Pratchett is one of America's most entertaining writers," said the Powell's City of Books website.

**R.I.P.** *Kir Bulychev* (1934-2003) was the sf pseudonym of Russian author and historian Igor Vsevolodovich Mozheiko, who died on 5 September. • *Marilyn E. Marlow*, literary agent (and later, executive VP) at Curtis Brown since 1959, died from cancer on 25 August, aged 75. Her clients

included Jane Yolen and Robert Cormier. • *Jules Engel* (1909-2003), Hungarian-born US animator best known for his work on Walt Disney's *Fantasia* (1940), died on 6 September aged 94. • *Jay Morton* (1911-2003), who scripted many of the Fleischer studios' 1940s *Superman* cartoons and wrote their legendary "Faster than a speeding bullet..." introduction, died on 6 September; he was 92. • *Donald O'Connor* (1925-2003), US actor who co-starred in the first six "Francis the Talking Mule" films (1950-55), died on 27 September; he was 78. "It was wonderful at first. But after three pictures Francis started getting more fan mail than I did and I said 'This can't happen.'" • *Warren Zevon*, (1947-2003) US singer/songwriter famed for the song "Werewolves of London," died from lung cancer on 7 September; he was 56. Zevon wrote theme songs and scores for TV's *Tales from the Crypt* and *William Shatner's Tekwar*.

**Doctor Who**, cancelled 14 years ago, is to return to BBC TV. Er, that's it.

**As Others See Us, Again.** Hal Niedzviecki of Canada's *Globe and Mail* saw us all too clearly at the Worldcon: "If the weird and dangerous ideas are out there, I couldn't find them amid the earnest, gentle, middle-class fans bustling through the convention in search of their pals."

**If Only.** Mark Millar's revelation (on the Comic Book Resources website) that Orson Welles planned a *Batman* film in 1946 – and got as far as production designs and a partial script – is, alas, a spoof.

**The Dead Past.** Thirty years ago, Malcolm Edwards prophetically wrote: "Well, I'm in the middle of an empire-building period just now..." (*Magic Pudding* #1 ed. M. Edwards, 1973)

**Thog's Masterclass.** *Dept of Inventions Suppressed by Oil Companies.* "He and the other Farm driver, an old man by the name of Jenkins, had meticulously revamped most of the cars here, and had converted the engines so that they ran on oxygen; they had solved the age-old problem of running out of petrol, and as long as they kept the engines clean, the cars could theoretically run forever for nothing." (Paul F. Savage, *The Man Who Saw The Future*, 2002) • *Eyeballs in the Sky Dept.* "Her jolly brown eyes made a complete circuit round my head, instead of looking at me straight when she answered." (E.F. Benson, "Home, Sweet Home," 1927) • *Visual Imagery Dept.* "O'Malley had a face like an inflated punctuation mark." (Joel Goldman, *Motion to Kill*, 2002)

**M**ore sf market penetration! Miles Kington wrongly tipped David Davis as Tory party leader: "It occurs to me that nobody has ever become Prime Minister bearing the same name twice. It has worked for science fiction writers (Harry Harrison)..." (*Independent*, 27 Oct)

## WHIRLIGIG WORLD

**J.G. Ballard** revealed his secretly cherished dream: "I've always found great rivers mysterious and I'd like to track the source of the Amazon. [...]. I'm not sure the source of the Amazon has ever been traced – there's certainly some doubt about it. I'm building a balsawood raft in my garden at the moment, but it's going very slowly." (*Independent on Sunday*, 26 Oct)

**J.M. Coetzee** is the first winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature (announced 2 Oct) to have been short-listed for the Philip K. Dick Award. The 1982 US paperback of his *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) lost to Rudy Rucker's *Software*.

**Tove Jansson** may have died in 2001, but on 4 Oct the *Guardian* books editor Nicholas Clee included her *The Summer Book* in a list of new bestsellers by first-time novelists. A very late debut...

**Terry Pratchett** dropped a hint that he may have originated in an unfamiliar leg of the Trousers of Time, when reminiscing in the *Telegraph* (4 Oct) about his early library reading: "vast amounts of Gollancz science fiction in those virulent magenta and purple covers that you could spot across the entire length of the fiction section."

**J.K. Rowling** placed fifth – and was the only woman – in a Top Ten list of highest-paid Brits, with earnings last year of around £125 million. (*Sunday Times*, 2 Nov)

## INFINITELY IMPROBABLE

**As Others See Us.** *Radio Times* invited alleged celebrities to comment on the BBC "Big Read" longlist of the public's 100 favourite books. Which clunkers should have been excluded? "All Terry Pratchett's novels," spat Jo Brand: "It's a bit unfair of me because I've probably only read the first page of one of his books, but sci-fi is a genre that really makes me want to bang my head against a wall." Her personal favourite on the list: *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The Pratchett-free shortlist of 21 included this and seven other sffantasy titles: *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, *His Dark Materials*, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Wind in the Willows*, and *Winnie-the-Pooh*.

## ANSIBLE LINK-2



DAVID LANGFORD

**Science Corner.** *Dept of Now Why Didn't We Think Of That Before?* "How can we best protect ourselves against the bioterror attack certain to come one day? The ultimate answer is personal self-defense – arming the human immune system with the power to recognize, attack and defeat any germ or virus that a bioterrorist can create. Such an alliance between brain and immune cells would also defeat all other diseases now afflicting humanity." (William Safire, *New York Times*, 20 Oct)

**R.I.P.** *Hal Clement* (Harry Clement Stubbs, 1922-2003), well-loved US author of hard sf whose career spanned more than 60 years, died peacefully on 29 October; he was 81. His first story "Proof" appeared in *Astounding* in 1942 and his final novel *Noise* in 2003. Fandom honoured him as professional GoH at the 1991 Worldcon, and SFWA as their 1999 Grand Master; he also received the 1997 Skylark award and a 1996 Retro Hugo for "Uncommon Sense" (1945). • *Jack Elam* (1916-2003), US actor typecast as a villain in many film/TV westerns, died on 20 October aged 86; his rare genre appearances included *Uninvited* (1993) and the role of Frankenstein's creation in the late-70s TV sitcom *Struck By Lightning*. • *Lloyd Arthur Eshbach* (1910-2003), old-time US writer, publisher, fan and chronicler of sf, died on 29 October aged 93. He edited the first book about then-contemporary sf: *Of Worlds Beyond: The Science of Science Fiction Writing* (1947), with essays by leading authors. • *William Steig* (1907-2003), prolific US cartoonist and illustrator whose popular children's books included *Shrek* (1990), died on 3 October aged 95. His first cartoon sold in 1930 to *The New Yorker*, which published him for over 70 years.

**As Others See Us II.** Playwright Neil LaBute congratulated himself (*Guardian*, 30 Oct) on anticipating some people's use of 9/11 to disappear and start new lives. As the prescient LaBute put it: "That notion has always stuck with me, the anti-Rousseauvian logic that people have as much capacity for doing bad as they do good. In fact, I've been making a fair living over the past few years writing about just that, and while my work has been embraced and reviled, no one has ever accused me of writing science fiction." Phew – that's all right, then.

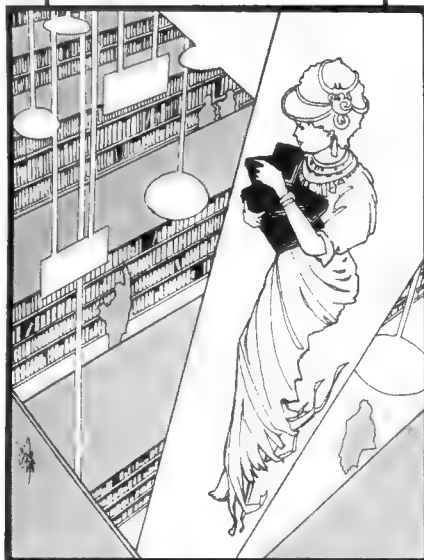
**World Fantasy Awards.** *Life Achievement* (two awards): Lloyd Alexander; Donald M. Grant. *Novel* (tie): Graham Joyce, *The Facts of Life*; Patricia A. McKillip, *Ombria in Shadow*. *Novella*: Zoran Zivkovic, "The Library" (*Leviathan 3*). *Short*: Jeffrey Ford, "Creation" (*F&SF 5/02*). *Anthology* (tie): Ellen Datlow & Terri Windling, *The Green Man*; Forrest Aguirre & Jeff VanderMeer, *Leviathan Three*. *Collection*: Jeffrey Ford, *The Fantasy Writer's Assistant*. *Artist*: Tom Kidd. *Special/Professional*: Gordon Van Gelder (*F&SF*). *Special/Non-Professional*: Night Shade Books.

**Yawn.** The Association of Christian Teachers is reportedly demanding that schools boycott the £850K National Theatre production of *His Dark Materials*, on grounds of blasphemy. (*TLS*, Nov)

**Korean Fantasy?** John Jarrold, former editor at Earthlight, was a delegate at the UK-Korea Fantasy Publishing Forum in Seoul (19 Sep), where he detected great interest in translated commercial fantasy – as distinct from Korea's "literary" fantasy tradition. Opportunity beckons, says John, and invites published authors to contact him in his role as "liaison and conduit to various Korean publishers."

**Thog's Masterclass.** *Metaphor Dept.* "Long-since dusty hopes are about to float away on the invisible ink of time, he thought." (Robert Newcomb, *The Fifth Sorceress*, 2002.) • *Neat Tricks Dept.* "A minute later, he was vomiting up the breakfast he had not eaten." (Peter Straub, *Lost Boy Lost Girl*, 2003) • *Brain Race Dept.* "A pair of bushy eyebrows jutted out above his [Francis Galton's] orbits like two hands cupped over the brow of a man peering into an unfathomable distance. At the same time, his dense windswept sideburns swerved back dramatically behind his earlobes, as though his mind was speeding faster than the rest of his head." (Edwin Black, *War Against the Weak*, 2003)





## REVIEWED

## Narrative Riches

*William Thompson*

One of the more narratively rich fictions I have read in science fiction, Adam Roberts's *Polystom* (Gollancz, £17.99 hc; £10.99 pb) is a novel that constantly explores its compositional approach and perspective, in the process quietly re-examining not only its main character's understanding of himself and the world around him, but the reader's fictional assumptions as well. Adam Roberts adroitly creates a narrative which not only reflects its interest in how the story is told, as well as the telling's influence upon perception, but which mirrors similar thematic concerns that resonate throughout the novel. And though the author's success in this task is not always equal, the challenges he presents himself, and the subtlety through which they are displayed, are laudable, with many-faceted rewards for the reader.

Taking its name from the main character, the title of this novel should alert its audience to the multiplicity of its interests. As if this were not enough, the publisher in a cover caption gives away: "Two Universes, One Reality." But this advertisement only hints at the broader and more obvious reality that evolves over the narration of the novel: its composition is far more polymorphous than a simple duality. This becomes evident in a cursory skim of its narrative contents. The novel is divided into three interrelated and temporally linked stories, the first a love story; the second, of murder; the third a tale of ghosts. Each of these narratives is further divided into numbered leaves, alternately suggesting lamina or folioles branching from a larger phylotactic or genetic tree. Yet the identity of each of these leaves or chapters is called into question, presented as parentheticals, as is the persona of the narrator. This is a story historically recounted, possibly reconstructed by some unspici-

fied scholar from an assemblage of scrolled text found in various states of decay and repair. Thus, throughout the novel one encounters missing sections, or text that is only partial or has been added as inferred. And the potential existence of more than one original narrator, or someone who has gathered accounts together after the fact, becomes implied during the brief shift in the novel's perspective that comes at the beginning of the second story. When added to the parallel coexistence of real and programmed realities within the novel, verity becomes a constant and intentional issue.

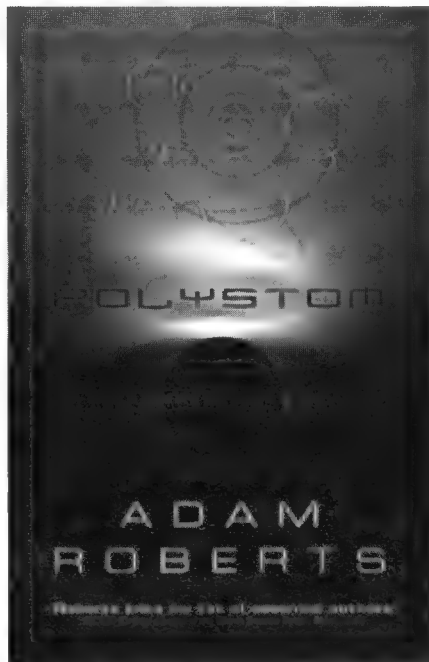
Roberts has placed this textual shell game within a fictional world at once eccentric and temporally reflective of our own. Echoes of an alternate society that

bizarrely blends an early modernity with an oligarchic aristocracy predicated upon vast, pastoral estates and serfdom, where science and invention have advanced no further than the early automobile, yet flight is possible between planets by dirigible or propeller-driven biplane, the novel's realm mirrors a quasi-Edwardian or late-Victorian state that never encountered the demise of the Grand Siecle, having been allowed to attain and stultify in its full potential, but on a solar scale. As space is not a vacuum, the solar system has been colonized: landed gentry oversee the farming of planets and moons, and society is heirarchially split between hereditary nobility and a slavish servant class. Everything is governed and held in balance by a natural authority and order, foreshadowed early in the work by Polystom's satisfaction in the engineering of his aeroplane:

"It was so delightful, the way it responded, the way it fitted together, every component working in mechanical harmony with every other one."

Social order is enforced not only by long custom and unquestioning conservatism, but by an imperial military that Tennyson or Kipling would have felt right at home with, yet possessing police powers reminiscent of the Czars or more contemporary states. Everywhere Roberts bends and blurs past and present, eclectically gerrymandering temporal elements to create a world of never-was, where the past compresses into the future, and the present at times seems anachronism. Nowhere is the latter more apparent than in a science that has created a Computational Device, commuting regularly between planets (granted, in biplanes and zeppelins) but that, despite all contrary evidence, refutes the existence of stars or a universe beyond its own solar system, and where acceptance of "how the world is... is the key."

This fictional realm, and most of the events of the novel, is told through the perspective of Polystom, an effete and naïve character uniquely qualified to lead the reader through the shifting lens of the novel's evolving vision. The fifth steward of Enting, an estate that spans an entire continent, Polystom's view of life is shaped by poetry, informed by the heightened (and artificial) sensitivity that verse has given him, along with a belief that his own breeding has rightfully established his place in the world. This inheritance and its accompanying status and wealth is not questioned, any more than the existence and necessity of a large population of impoverished servants to provide every need, and over which Polystom wields absolute power. Society is but an extension of a greater order whose very existence supports its own truth, one's purpose within the universe determined, not by any action or



accomplishment, but “just by what he was.” Granted, not every aspect of his life may be what Stom might have chosen – he would prefer to be a poet wandering the woods seeking out beauty and inspiration rather than running an estate – and certain responsibilities, such as disciplining his servants – “Stom remembered the hanging. How unaesthetic that had been” – disturb his inner sense of beauty and tranquillity, but certain duties must be shouldered. Yet events will conspire that increasingly call Polystom’s view of his world, and his own identity, into doubt – a suicide in which Polystom plays no little part; the senseless murder of his uncle; a haunted battleground that re-enacts the horrors of World War I – in the process raising issues that will unsettle the reader’s own perceptions, dawning understanding deftly paralleling the character’s own.

The author unassumingly defies many of the customary conventions. Polystom is far from a dynamic or sympathetic character, yet is depicted with a sensitivity and insight that most readers should discover all too human. The plot evolves in an oblique and subtly convoluted fashion, in many respects mirroring not only the character’s circular and emerging insights, but the shifting views upon reality that occur throughout the novel. The end result is quite unexpected from what the novel’s opening suggests, and the author shows great skill at being able to manipulate and alter his story’s direction and plot without losing control of the overarching themes which ultimately binds the tale together. In so doing, Roberts displays a deft and understated mastery of his medium that is refreshing amidst so much fiction that is either overtly direct or dramatic in its uses and intentions. And there are many memorable moments, delivered in the same unobtrusive manner, vivid descriptive passages or ironic juxtapositions, such as the posing of a bloated corpse against the beauty implied in the imagery of flies that arise from the body, “like pollen billowing off a tree-top in spring.” Similarly, the author will interject amidst the play of other inconsequential incidents – almost as if in passing and utilizing his usual concise, unburnished prose – that perhaps most quintessential of existential dilemmas:

“...if he cared at all, then it would endorse this preposterousness, and in turn this would render the whole of the cosmos chaotic and absurd... For the universe to bring a consciousness into existence, to allow it to grow and develop and mix with others and gain understanding, to achieve so many things only, in the end, to achieve nothing... was intolerable.”

If the author falters at all, it is during the third section of the novel, which seems compressed compared to what has preceded, a slight hitch in the nar-

native’s internal rhythms.

Another reviewer, Nick Gevers, has elsewhere noted that Roberts, in his three previous novels, has displayed a willingness to embrace bold concepts: “a planet encrusted with salt, a world where gravity applies horizontally, a prison inside a star, an Arctic nature reserve seeded with gene-engineered tropical predators, and the sudden appearance of Jupiter huge in the Earth’s sky.” The ideas incorporated into this novel are no less daring, either in composition or in the manner in which the author is willing to question the character’s – and our own – assumptions about reality. And this is achieved in a manner quite original in its compositional approach, as well as discerning in its style of writing.

I confess that until now I’ve never read any of Roberts’s books. This is an oversight I intend to correct. And if *Polystom* should prove at all indicative of his previous work, I will certainly heed the advice from *Vector* that appears on the back cover, and “Roberts [will join] my list of essential authors.”

The success of the next novel should surprise no one, as it is a collaboration between one of the finest authors writing science fiction as well as one of the best of the small, independent presses. Published by Golden Gryphon, *Nothing Human* by Nancy Kress (Golden Gryphon Press, \$26.95) foreshadows and defies its title, exploring nothing less than evolution and what it means to be human. Set within our own era, as well as a possible – some might say probable – near future, this is a tale of alien visitation whose intent is to save humanity, but whose rescue threatens our very identity.

In 1999 a small clinic opens in New York, offering *in vitro* fertilization on a

sliding scale as part of a research project. The clinic operates briefly with a high rate of success, then abruptly closes its doors. The brilliant physician heading the project disappears. Fourteen years later 80 of the children created by the clinic simultaneously fall into a coma. Tests reveal that each possesses an anomalous, quiescent growth on their frontal lobes, located in the region of the glomeruli, which processes olfactory signals to other important centres in the brain. Additionally, each child displays an increase in cerebral neuron activity by as much as 20 percent, with identical neural firing patterns. But most alarming is the appearance of an extra and unknown set of genes attached to the sixth chromosome, whose presence in all 80 children, each a product of the same clinic, defies contemporary medical science, which claims it is impossible. After several weeks, the children awake from their comas and announce: “The pribir are coming.”

The mysterious growth on their frontal lobes is now active. Tests continue to be run, but in all other respects the children appear normal. However, they are now in contact with someone from outside our solar system, who communicates with them through the smell of molecules released in the air, using perhaps a method of sophisticated pheromones. The children reassure that the pribir are “people from another star system who are [coming] to help us with our genes,” to instruct us in “the right way.” But the right way appears to preclude nuclear energy, and when the pribir finally arrive and destroy an orbiting nuclear power station, the government quickly steps in, quarantining the children at Andrews Air Force Base. This is done not only to study the children and learn of the aliens’ true intentions, but to safeguard them from the suspicion and hostility the pribir’s arrival has generated.

The pribir’s exact intentions, however, remain mysterious. The children have no fear of them, believing they are nothing more than advanced humans who have learned how to control their own evolution. Twenty-six of the children, with the pribir’s assistance, will sneak away from Andrews to join the pribir in their ship. Their experience with mankind’s new saviours will alter the future of humanity, offering hope as well as an end to our existence as we have known it.

Told through multiple viewpoints and temporal perspectives, Kress sets this engaging speculative drama within a not distant period of ecological upheaval, in which global warming and biological warfare alter our planet to the point where mankind’s survival is threatened. The pribir’s attempt to rescue us from possible extinction, while benign, is motivated by an understanding of evolution quite at odds with our most basic



conceptions of free will and what defines us as human. And the choices the children will have to face, along with their descendants, will confront the very essence their own humanity.

A story that speculates upon an all too plausible future, in which mankind's genetic legacy is revealed as both the engineer of our own destruction and as a source for salvation, possibilities – and more importantly, choices – are presented that are uncomfortable, sometimes grim in their eventual insights and outcome, yet offer hope for the future. The only perceivable hitch in this tale of loss, hard survival and redemption, is its dependence upon outside intervention, which some may find a romanticism unlikely to save us in the end. Nonetheless, this is one of the more enjoyable and intriguing fictions I have read this year, and the future Kress has envisioned, for all its harshness, is balanced by the deep compassion and understanding with which she treats her characters, who at times seem all too real not to offer both despair and comfort.

**Album Zutique #1** (Night Shade/Ministry of Whimsy Press, \$12.99) is the latest anthology edited by Jeff VanderMeer, noted for his exceptional anthology series, *Leviathan*, as well as the brilliant and idiosyncratic *City of Saints and Madmen*. This volume is the start of a new series of anthologies, each to be edited by a different editor, focusing upon surreal, fantastic and decadent literature. Perhaps reflective of the French Decadent movement, this first book represents some of the best of that aesthetic's flights of imagination, as well as its less admirable excesses. And some may find the opening quote from Lautréamont – “It would not be good for everyone to read the pages which follow; only the few may relish this bitter fruit without danger” – suggestive of more than was intended.

The anthology opens, oddly enough, with a misstep, an imagined bestiary or human zoo based upon various literary and other figures that is only mildly clever, and hardly seems the best introduction for this collection. Written by the usually adept Stepan Chapman, I suspect this represents an idea that, at its outset, seemed far richer in potential than its result suggests, or alternately speculate that this may be the outgrowth of similar conceits that have more successfully informed VanderMeer's own writing. Whatever the source, whether due to a concept that remained stillborn or was poorly nurtured by Chapman, this contribution, apparently a homage to Austrian author Franz Blei, fails to deliver.

Fortunately the next two stories are among the best in the book. “The Beautiful Gelreesh,” by Jeffrey Ford, offers a haunting and beautifully written tale of

a marvellous creature that entices and preys upon people's despair. A natural segue from Chapman's earlier story, this narrative is arguably no more significant in its import, but is far more evocative in its imagery, creating a legend that lingers in the mind of the reader. Rhys Hughes's following story, “The Toes of the Sun,” first part of a larger, equally well-written and related narrative that concludes the collection, is a delightful fable of the minstrel, Don Enterrusca, who gives up performing to become a spectator. One evening, his criticism of a sunset so demeans the sun that it refuses to rise again. Faced with perpetual darkness, the residents of his village demand that the former musician find a substitute for the light he has shamed into hiding. The only solution he can think of is to substitute the sun's glow with the radiance from the smile of the most beautiful woman in the world. But Senorita Eber Sola is a woman known for spurning every minstrel that ever sought her favour, including Don Enterrusca. To gain her smile, he will have to create a very unique instrument.

Other successes follow: James Sallis's grim and acerbic confessional, “Free Time,” or the intriguing glimpse, in “Mortal Love,” of Elizabeth Hand's forthcoming novel, written with the author's usual quiet skill. More overt in approach, “The Catgirl Manifesto: An Introduction,” written by Richard Calder under the pseudonym Christine Flook (or X), is the most outrageous fiction in the collection, posing as an academic essay diagnosing an epidemic of feminine sexual criminality. The result is both barbed and humorous.

But there are also an equal number of disappointments, at least one of which was a surprise. After being impressed by K.J. Bishop's novel *The Etched City*, I looked forward to her inclusion in this anthology. But despite its dynamic prose, “Maldoror Abroad” was a ponderous thread of overly dense verbiage in desperate need of pruning, and unlike another critic I soon wearied of the rambling “collage of morbid images and scenery” which seemed, in the end, indulgent and pointless. “My Stark Lady,” by D. J. Lewis, similarly lacked focus, a disjointed tale replete with authorial asides and parentheticals, and reminiscent of the types of stories so often cluttering college literary magazines. This observation was not dispelled by the patently hip voice adopted for the narrator, or characterizations that were generationally enisled and typecast (the author's second story, “Lights,” was more successful). Ursula Pflug also delivers an inconsequential confection, notable only for its errant, readily drug-induced and hallucinogenic staging. Though the general quality of writing is high, overall this gathering of stories remains a very mixed bag.

William Thompson

## Slim Elegance

Liz Williams

Decapitated meerkats, decaying city states, terrifying dreamscapes and gruesome deaths – this just has to be a Jeff VanderMeer story. VanderMeer is developing a deserved reputation as having one of the weirdest imaginations in the field, and *Veniss Underground* (Tor Macmillan, £10.99) is no exception.

On a far-future Earth, in the vast city known as Veniss, three people encounter the enigmatic figure of Quin, a genetic engineer and arch manipulator. Nicholas, his sister Nicola and her ex-lover Shadrach, each have an encounter with Quin that changes them forever. And not in a good way. As the story unfolds, we encounter the creatures of Quin (and VanderMeer's) darkest imaginings: ganeshas and talking meerkats



(don't expect cute, you won't get it) that form both entertainment and the city's underclass; fish used as transport; dogs with women's faces... This is one of those novels in which the setting is itself a character: Veniss is strange, sinister and just plain terrifying.

This book contains a very contemporary combination of elements: horror, sf, the fantastic and the surreal. However, in *Veniss Underground*, VanderMeer is not just weird for the sake of it. His alarming city has its roots in contemporary science: genetic engineering, body modification, and impending eco-disaster. This firm grounding in the potential ills of modern science place VanderMeer's work in the classic role of sf – to highlight modern problems, and extrapolate them to one, at least, of their logical conclusions.

VanderMeer is rapidly making a name for himself as one of the most interesting writers in genre, and it's deserved. His world-building is among some of the most intriguing in contemporary fiction and his writing is, by turns, lyrical, morbid and strange. His work is also economically written, a rare treat in a genre that all-too-frequently gets overloaded with literary padding. You could not physically stun anyone with a copy of *Veniss Underground*, and that's a good thing: high time, in my opinion, that we returned to a more streamlined kind of book, valuing style and story over reams of needless description and labyrinthine plot. On the basis of this slim, elegant book, I would highly recommend VanderMeer as both stylist and storyteller.

Stephen Baxter's cover quote describes *Wyrmhole* by Jay Caselberg (Roc, \$6.99) as "an adrenaline rush of a debut" – a pretty good description of this fast-paced, noir-sf first novel.



Jack Stein is a psychic investigator, resident in a huge, moving urban sprawl called the Locality. His ability to solve cases rests on dreams, psychometry, hunches – things which in our world are mere superstition, but which in this far-future interplanetary society have become real. When the story starts, Jack's in the classic condition of PIs everywhere: washed up, down on his luck, and taking too many stimulants. All it needs is for a dodgy blonde to stroll through the door and park herself on his desk. In fact, this doesn't happen: instead, Jack starts having dreams, of a snake with its tail in its mouth. Hired by the sinister Outreach Industries to find out what has become of some missing miners, Jack is soon embroiled in a murky underworld of corporate double-dealing and the only blonde with whom he becomes involved is a sharp-tongued street urchin, Billie.

Like *Veniss Underground*, *Wyrmhole* is very much a novel on a cross-genre platform: mixing elements of sf, noir and classic detective fiction to impressive effect. The underpinnings of this particular case of Jack's are Kabbalistic and alchemical, and anyone with a working knowledge of either will find much to intrigue them in the textured layers of

the Stein dreamscape. What I found particularly effective in this book, however, was the nature of the protagonist. I won't name names, but there are a number of writers working in the field today who have taken on board the central figure of the maverick anti-hero. I can think of at least two novels in the last year in which I've picked up the book, started reading, and by the end of the first chapter have thought "why the hell should I sympathize with this guy?" Amorality and ruthlessness do not a sympathetic character make, though they are easy enough to write, and in these cases, there turned out not to be much subsequent character development, either. Classic noir works best when the protagonist is portrayed as a moral man in tough times, conflicted, torn, beset by real issues. Jack confronts his own fading integrity, especially where his protection of Billie is concerned (I don't recall Bogart ever being saddled with a stropky little girl, but I could be wrong – I'm sure he'd have handled it in similar manner). And Jack strives to find solutions, and this is what makes him a hero in the classic sense.

Altogether, a great read.

Liz Williams

## The Long Game

Nigel Brown

Stephen Baxter's *Coalescent: Destiny's Children, Book 1* (Gollancz, £12.99) is a mystery adventure that continues the examination of human evolution begun by his last novel *Evolution* (2003), which I reviewed in *Interzone* 188.

This new book begins with the story of George Poole, who has returned to the old family home after the death of his father. He meets an old schoolfriend there who introduces him to some seemingly way-out ideas about dark matter and aliens, but soon Poole is chasing the mystery of a sister he never knew that he had. Rosa Poole was sent away by his family to live in Rome with the Puissant Order of Holy Mary, Queen of Virgins, when George was very young. We follow Poole's quest to meet his sister, along with his attempts to cope with his guilt about his dysfunctional family and his own failed career. There's much here to appeal to the middle-aged nostalgic. Bizarrely, I'd only just been reminded myself of Mike Noble's vivid artwork in "Fireball XL5" from the British comic *TV21* (having just purchased two issues

recently for old times' sake) before George Poole in *Coalescent* is waxing enthusiastic about the same thing. Baxter is clearly hitting a nerve here (at least with me), but I wondered if there was too much of this – the story seemed to get mired in regret, guilt and the past (a Baxter "Catholic guilt" novel?) when we are saved by the introduction of the strongest character in the book: Regina of Roman Britain.

Poole has heard of an old family legend about the family being descended from Regina, a Romano-British girl of the fifth century. Before long, Baxter reels the narrative back over 16 centuries to relate Regina's story. Her struggles to survive amidst the collapsing civilization of Roman Britain make for a fascinating story set in a true historical context. It's a familiar tale – the basis within which so many sf stories have been set – but, given the reality of this era, Regina's narrative of suffering and survival is all the more poignant and enjoyable. We, ourselves, currently perceive our civilization as on the crest of an advancing wave, much like the



Romans did. This gives the story of the Roman collapse an added edge: these people are much closer to us than most out of history, being used to, among other things, central heating and marketplaces that sold mass-manufactured goods from all over the Empire.

The first part of *Coalescent* alternates between Poole's search for his sister and his ancestor Regina's search for security, but the focus abruptly shifts about a third of the way through the novel. Regina's story begins to alternate with that of Lucia, a 15-year-old suddenly coming into puberty within the depths of a mysterious community named the Crypt. This is the first sf intimation in the novel, besides some references to "something in the Kuiper Belt." Baxter is an expert in describing humans living in strange environments: witness his novel *Flux* (1993) where the humans (by their nature) inhabit the interior of a star, or the superb short story "Downstream" (1993) in *Interzone* 75, in which people live within a constant current of force.

In setting out the arguments for the value of "community" against the needs of any particular individual, Baxter is exploring an interesting conflict of emphasis within society that sf has often addressed. Mankind has made progress by the pooling of its resources (and I hope George Poole's name isn't a dreadful pun!), but the cost has been the continual, inevitable restriction of the individual within that society. There's a payback in security, food supply, available resources, that makes it worthwhile for the individual to accept the restrictions of living in a city, for example. But sf can ask the question: at which point does this no longer hold, when the individual may suffer,

although the group as a whole may continue to be more successful as a consequence of this? Robert A. Heinlein was a strong advocate of the libertarian individual throughout his work. In contrast, one of Arthur C. Clarke's masterpieces was *Childhood's End* (1953) which posited the opposite view, with humanity combining as a "group-mind" at the end of our species' evolution.

So one of the most interesting, and relevant, aspects of this book is its highlighting of the concepts of groupings of individuals within our society, and the unconscious pressures of conformity and motivation that this puts onto individuals within the group. We are in deep waters here, but this creepy aspect of *Coalescent* is the one that will linger on in the mind, long after the book has been put down. By the end of the novel, Baxter ties the various threads together in a satisfactory and enjoyable way, seemingly leaving little room for a sequel. The book works well as a stand-alone, yet this is only the first part of a trilogy. It will be fascinating to see how Baxter develops this theme in the next volume. He has taken his time to get going in this work but, like Regina of Roman Britain, he is playing the long game.

With so many novels, magazines and anthologies shouting their contents from their front covers, to come across an anthology that displays no author names is intriguing. *The Silver Gryphon* (Golden Gryphon Press, \$27.95), edited by Gary Turner and Marty Halpern, is an original anthology that celebrates the Golden Gryphon Press publishing venture with this, their 25th book (hence the title). The 20 authors featured have all appeared in one or more of the first 24 books from Golden Gryphon, and include such luminaries as Lucius Shepard, Michael Bishop and Geoffrey A. Landis. They were all asked to write a story that they felt best defined them as a writer; this book gives a fascinating insight into how they see their work. The stories featured are so varied in content, style, and even genre (ranging from hard sf to soft fantasy, to mainstream), that it's a great pleasure to start reading any of these tales just to see what's on offer next.

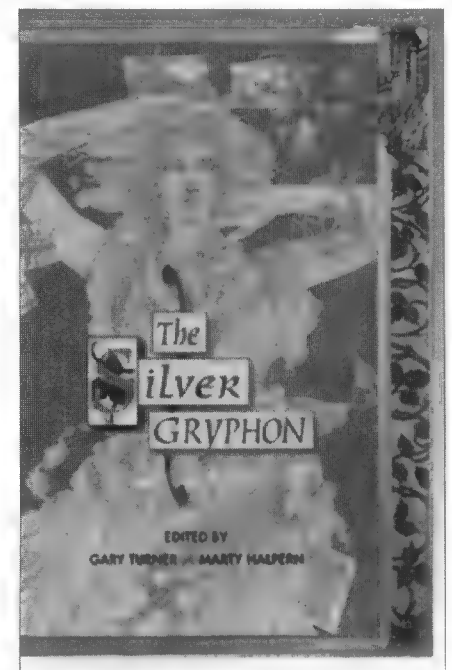
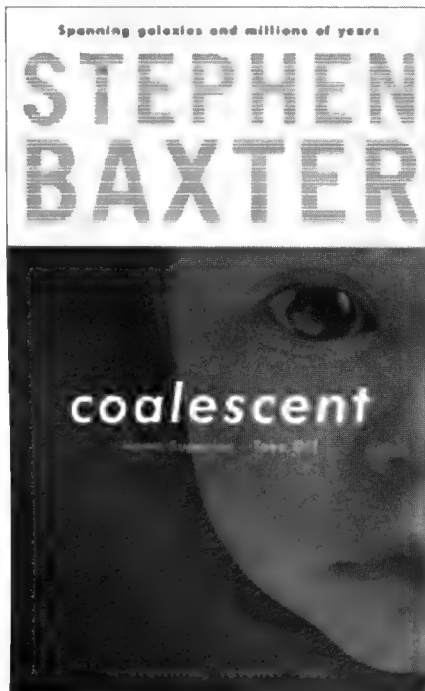
Lucius Shepard and Kage Baker return to familiar territory, but their stories are no less enjoyable for that. With Shepard's mainstream tale, "After Ildiko," we're in Central America (where so many of Shepard's richly drawn stories are set) and in the company of Pederson, a useless piece of human flotsam on a barge journey up the Rio Dulce. He's fallen in with a Swiss woman, Ildiko, under the jealous eye of the captain of the barge, Joseph Rawley. The story takes us deep into Pederson's psyche as he copes with the consequences of his thoughtless actions involving Ildiko,

and his subsequent attempts to retrieve their relationship. By the end, I found myself in sympathy with him, despite his unsavoury character: a tribute to Shepard's skill. As a study of isolation, it's up to the usual superlative Shepard standard.

I reviewed Kage Baker's *Black Projects, White Knights: The Company Dossiers* (2003) in *Interzone* 187, a collection of stories about a group of time-travelling cyborgs. Her contribution to this anthology, "A Night On the Barbary Coast," is another Company story set in 19th-century California. It features the field biologist Mendoza on a manhunt in boomtown San Francisco. As a Company story, it doesn't reveal anything more about the organization's background or problems (as hinted at in *Black Projects, White Knights*), which is a disappointment, although no surprise in a showcase anthology. On the upside, it contains many of the delightful details we've come to expect from Baker as she describes the difficulties her future-aware cyborgs have in their interaction with the natives. So: nothing new here, but fun nevertheless.

Given that there's no particular theme to this anthology, it's interesting that the subject of time travel features in five out of 20 tales. The most memorable time-travel story in this collection is "Takes You Back" by George Zebrowski. A man steps out to get a pizza, and finds himself two-and-a-half years in his past. It's classic *Twilight Zone*, and Zebrowski does a great job taking the reader through this dilemma, building the tension well until our hapless time traveller lives through normal time up to the point where he disappeared in the first place.

Geoffrey A. Landis, with "The Time-Travel Heart," leaps into his time tale with gusto. It's the sort of story that



would have graced the pages of *Galaxy* magazine many years ago – a time-travel paradox that reads well, looks so simple it verges on the trite, but avoids that fate with panache. Does this mean that Landis sees himself as a writer of retro sf? The story concerns the invention of a time machine, and an attempt to make money out of it. I'm hampered by the desire not to give the ending away: I can only recommend this as a tale that starts with farce, and ends up as deliciously creepy. Another time story is Kevin J. Anderson's "An Innocent Pre-sumption." It concerns a time-travelling woman who's after a serial killer, crossing alternate realities in an effort to catch each reality's version of the killer. It raises interesting questions about destiny and free will in the unique way that only an sf story can.

On a different subject, some of the stories are primarily concerned with American issues (not a surprise as the writers are mainly American). Michael Bishop's "The Door Gunner" takes us back to Vietnam, when the gunner of a gunship helicopter ends up as a zombie. "The American Monarchy" by Richard A. Lupoff takes a satirical poke at the controversy following the Presidential election of George W. Bush (remember the Florida "chads" controversy?). In this alternative world, the situation has been resolved by Bush and Gore sharing the Presidency. Another story that has a political edge is "Tropical Nights at the Natatorium" by Richard Paul Russo. He explores the phenomenon of rich tourists deciding to establish themselves

among poorer peoples, and the subsequent exploitation leading to terrorist action. Sadly, in a world where we've had the Bali bombing, this story hardly counts as sf. The reality of terrorist attacks on Western tourists in the Third World mean that the story's ending is underplayed to the point where it needs to be much more horrific to be credible.

On a lighter note, several writers set out to write humour. "Kwantum Babes" by Neal Barrett, Jr. is hampered by the irritable point-of-view of its drunk protagonist, but takes an effective dig at the pathetic efforts of astronomers to bed their beautiful girl groupies (do scientists have these? If not, why not?). "Fire Dog" by Joe R. Lansdale is the stronger story. It takes an absurd premise and runs with it to its ultimate conclusion. I guessed the ending, but it didn't matter as – in the best jokes – the telling itself was fun. Yet there is a Kafkaesque element to this story, too, whereby the job "becomes the man" to the point where the man himself is extinguished. There's a serious point here, which is the mark of the best humour.

"Far Barbary" by R. Garcia y Robertson is the only fantasy tale in this anthology. It follows the adventures of a Scottish knight abroad as he copes with beautiful English maidens in distress, airships full of fierce Turks and Tartars, and Giant Rocs. Sinbad meets King Arthur in an enjoyable, light adventure. Other stories worth a mention include two that examine romance in its many forms. In "What's Up, Tiger Lily?" by

Paul Di Filippo, a young genius has invented information-processing paper. He has paid the price of social and emotional immaturity for his intellectual triumphs, but Di Filippo does bring some sympathy to his nerdy hero. Ian Watson writes a touching tale in "Separate Lives." It uses the sf element to emphasize what is already an excellent story about enduring love between a separated couple. For my money, though, "Cowboy Grace" by Kristine Kathryn Rusch is the star of this collection. This is a mainstream story about a successful lady accountant who, in the throes of a mid-life crisis, decides to chuck it all in and become a croupier at the poker tables in the Nevada casinos. The consequences of her seemingly innocent action are surprising; I enjoyed the company of this feisty lady.

So does this anthology offer a collection of stories that "best define" its authors? By the nature of the premise, none of the writers are setting out consciously to break new ground, just showcase what they do best. Given their calibre, its no surprise that the stories have such a consistently high standard. As an introduction to these writers, this book is also an excellent starting point. It's an impressive anthology and a worthy tribute to the Golden Gryphon Press. Although it does hide its authors' lights under a bushel by not putting their names on its cover, I hope that isn't detrimental to its well-deserved success.

Nigel Brown

*"It's like a finger, pointing to the moon... SMACK... don't concentrate on the finger or you will miss all that heavenly glory"*  
– Bruce Lee

Although there is much disagreement and hasty back-tracking should the question of *when* be brought up (2012, the long-standing favourite has become unsettlingly close nowadays and in recent sources quietly shuffled back to 2017, fourteen years obviously being a more reasonable time for believers to fulfil any imminent ambitions), thanks to fuzzy quibbles over Mayan theology and the McKenna brothers' improvised arithmetic, the notion of (the) Eschaton can be seen as an essential rational tool for anyone brave enough to look forward. From where we stand now, the existence of a technological future clearly needs to overcome the massive geopolitical barriers to progress that look likely to dominate the old science-fictional utopia-dream called the 21st century. For our brighter imaginary tomorrows to be possible, or for us to survive at all, something big and irrevocable needs to happen – Eschaton is one of the names given this massive abyss between us and our collective horizon.

Discord is rife again concerning *how*

## Remote Speaking

Bob Keery

the corkscrew-point of history's culmination will manifest. Forgetting 20th-century alien abduction fantasies and New-Age dreams of talking dolphins with workable models of ex-aqua civilizations tucked under their flippers, plenty of other traditional predictions abound. Simultaneous species-wide activation of the brain's tryptamine bonding sites and subsequent everlasting communion with the buzzing word-elves of shamanic drug-space is still favoured in California. Prince Charles supports the nano-rapture or grey-goo scenario, where the

chance, deliberate or just plain miraculous invention of molecule-sized architects skilled in the ways of raw matter build us all our ideal homes. A favourite *how* theory (not *the* favourite, which for any clever bet-hedger must surely be "all of the above") relies on the prospect of emergent internet intelligence, where digital sentence and agency evolve as epiphenomena of the web's ever-deepening complexity. In *Singularity Sky* (Ace, \$23.95), his first novel in book form, Charles Stross favours this latter interpretation with wise pinches of others – including the development of 4-D mobility through FTL travel – to imminentize his Eschaton, the big leap of thought that allows his high and far-flung technological society to sit within the bounds of plausibility.

A singularity manifests from the Ter-ran information network, a type-three intelligence on the Kardeshev index, something that exhibits all the characteristics of "God." Its actions are appropriately biblical in scale and arrogance, teleporting billions of humans to settle on suitable planets across a diaspora 3,000 light years wide, selected into groups by compatibility of desire, with space for ideologies to stretch without hitting each other too hard. The Escha-

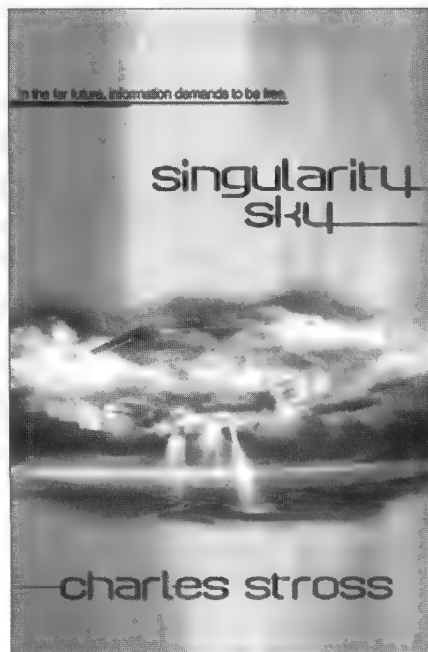
ton then fades into legend and self-contemplation, a jealous clause no insurance will cover, periodically reappearing to chastise entire star systems for desecrating its sole commandment: "Thou shalt not violate causality within my historic lightcone. Or else." No using that time machine to go back and rub Me out, in other words.

Four hundred years later time travel still offers military and economic temptations that certain nations of man find too difficult to resist. When what they perceive as an invasion by a force known as the Festival (the author lives in Edinburgh) occurs to one of the few backwater planets in their imperium, the leaders of the New Republic rashly decide to time jump from their distant homeworld to the instant that the Festival first decides to set up its big marquee in the sky. This crude surprise counter-attack strategy is symptomatic of the Republic mind-set, possibly describable as Stalinist tsarism, deeply suspicious of the omnivorous self-perfecting nanotech that powers the rest of human society's interstellar intercourse. Stross looks closely at the workings of the imperial flagship as it loops through space, fleshing out the onboard life and intrigue until it's almost too familiar, while the selectively technophobic Republicans' portrayal never quite receives the humorous treatment it seems so ripe for. A grotesque caricature or two aside, they feel like an excuse to have brass-knob steampunk trappings in a novel that elsewhere prefers to obsess over the mystery and significance of transhuman speculation, all megascale dynamics and Stapledon spheres. (Why would those chosen for resettlement by their common preference for the grip of repressive regimes be all of East-European, not, say Anglo-American, extraction?) The officers and shipmen of the flagship are well-drilled and almost campily devious, characters well-equipped to describe the details of timespace propulsion and sub-light deep-space combat. Stross is most comfortable with these aspects of the tale, with his lucidly technical vocabulary and conceit that mountain-sized cruisers battling across a million kilometres of vacuum would demand similar tactical restraint to modern-day submarine warfare. But while he builds long involved scenes of ranks snapping orders back and forth across control panels, procedural jargon races by like the changing patterns of stars, and equally easy to get lost in. Stross is too much of a pro to call "reverse the polarities," but at times you feel characters are coming close, and it is when his exacting grasp of mechanical protocol relaxes that the wit and charm of his voice comes through, like so much "jiggy-pokery in the ergosphere." What light relief the suspiciously Roddenberyesque setting provides comes from the clunky interaction of the two outsider leads, a UN weapons inspector cum

enhanced-reality spook and an engineer suffering the religious urge (Its wonders to perform), both keen that the Republic not erase the galaxy through its temporal transgression.

As the fleet spans parsecs and epochs on its interception course the Festival's influence on the colony unfolds in a parade of sky-wide firework artists, flora-forming sculptors, cryptic alien desert-rodents, chicken-leg Dali-houses, murderous Svankmajer street performers, free body upgrades and magic wishes granted. Amid the confusion and adjustment of a neglected sub-plot we find the narrative heart and soul, a cautious post-Marxist revolutionary who renders his entire life irrelevant when his theories of freedom and plenty are instantly realized. Echoing the dissipative absence of the Eschaton, the Festival operates on a different level of intelligence to the Republic (and even the Terran corporate-anarchist heroes), announcing its arrival with Fortean grace in the opening pages. Perhaps inspired by Hakim Bey's insurrectionary classic *Temporary Autonomous Zone*, the ontological risks in the Festival's millennial languor are not however examined with the required courage. We are told frequently that its all too clear behaviour is beyond human imagining and description, which then becomes an excuse not to try rather than a goad to further creative daring. We spend too much time cooped up in predictable escape-pod sequences and battle simulations, and the brief moments attending the Festival, often in the company of a young duke and his animal allies, show perhaps richer paths the story could have taken. The sky-high singularities of the title remain too distant even after light years of travel, their potential ramifications too grand for the prosaic plot-focus to satisfy.

Bob Keery



## Dunsany, Futurist

Mike Ashley

S.T. Joshi, probably still best known for his far-reaching scholarship into the life and works of H.P. Lovecraft, spread his wings long ago and has been producing a phenomenal number of books and studies on many classic and modern writers of weird and fantasy fiction. One of the major creative forces in fantasy who has benefited from his work has been Lord Dunsany (1878-1957). With Darrell Schweitzer, Joshi compiled the definitive and indispensable *Lord Dunsany: A Bibliography* (Scarecrow Press, 1993). More recently he worked with the Dunsany estate to bring out a collection of hitherto unpublished Jorkens stories, *The Last Book of Jorkens* (Nightshade Books, 2002); and now he's put into final shape a previously unpublished novel by Dunsany, *The Pleasures of a Futuroscope* (edited by S.T. Joshi; Hippocampus Press, 2003, 200pp, \$32.95).

Dunsany was frighteningly prolific. The aforementioned bibliography lists 92 books (excluding posthumous compilations) and 541 short stories, let alone masses of poetry, essays and plays. Of course he had a long writing life – over 50 years – but he wasn't a professional writer. He had much else to occupy his time, what with two estates to manage, two World Wars to cope with, and satisfying his pleasures with big-game hunting and chess. So even allowing for his astonishing writing facility, it's hard to believe there would be much left unpublished, least of all a complete novel.

Dunsany's last few novels were not amongst his best works. Like many disaffected by the Second World War, much of that sense of wonder and magic had been knocked out of him. He was often

the pessimist, as evident from so many of his early fantasies such as "The Hoard of the Gibbelins," with its sudden downbeat ending, so perhaps he was more mentally and spiritually resilient than others. *The Pleasures of a Futuroscope* is clearly influenced by the impact of the war, but it's surprisingly optimistic and is a definite improvement upon his other post-war novels, *The Last Revolution* (1951) and *His Fellow Men* (1952). It's one of Dunsany's few science-fiction works and is Wellsian in scope.

In his introduction Joshi tells us that the manuscript dates from 1955, and may have seen its origins in a short story, "The Two-Way War," in *Jorkens Borrows Another Whiskey* (1954), which introduced the character of the inventor Methery. Methery is off-stage in this novel, but his invention, the Futuroscope, a kind of combined television-telescope that allows you to scan the future as if looking down on your location from above, is the basis for the story.

The first-person narrator, who might just as well be Dunsany, has borrowed the futuroscope from the inventor who seems to have lost interest in it. He sets it up at his home, which may well be Dunsany's estate at Dunstall Priory in Kent, and proceeds to view the future of the Darenth Valley. There is a nuclear holocaust and, like Wells's time-traveller, the narrator has to scan through the years looking for signs of humanity's recovery. There are survivors, and eventually one family returns to the Valley to lead a primitive life.

The entire novel is the narrator's account of what he sees in the future. He becomes obsessed with following the trials and tribulations of this family, sometimes jumping a few days or weeks ahead, but otherwise following them closely, like some futurist version of Big Brother. As an observer he is, of course,

powerless to help them, and Dunsany succeeds in building tension into the story when danger threatens the family and the narrator frantically scans through the valley hoping they have survived. One threat is the mysterious "Wild Man," whose nature is never fully explained, but whose presence steadily pervades the book.

It's a surprisingly compulsive read, despite occasions when Dunsany digresses to consider the nature of the future or to explore other aspects of his theme. But the narrator's obsession soon becomes yours. You want the fam-

ily to survive, and Dunsany's story is a testament to the ability of the human race to struggle through the most insurmountable odds.

It may not be among Dunsany's best work, one could hardly expect that, but it's far from his poorest, and is a positive and most welcome finale to his career, available at last nearly 50 years after he wrote it. Hippocampus have produced a handsome hardcover edition of which Dunsany would have been proud, I am sure. Future assessments of Dunsany's work cannot ignore it.

Mike Ashley

## Breathtaking Epic

Martin Isitt

Upon the killing grounds that rise from the Aegean Sea to the walls of Troy, the romanticism of Homer's *Iliad* becomes the bloody reality of desperate conflict. Dr Thomas Hockenberry – a 20th-century scholar brought back to life by the Gods themselves – is forced to witness the slaughter and compare the classical texts with actual events. As Zeus and his pantheon of delinquents play a bloodthirsty game of chess from the lofty halls of Olympus Mons on Mars, in which the human heroes from that legendary war are the hapless pawns, Thomas is drawn into that deadly game and must himself become a player, in order to end the insane atrocity – as well as prevent his own demise at the hands of his cruel masters.

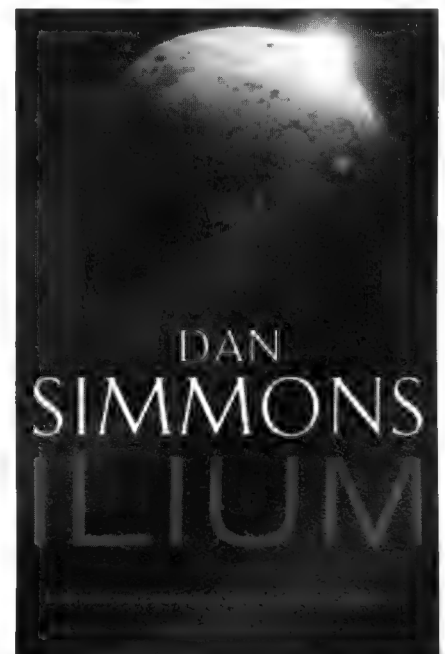
A party of robots, who have made their home among the radiation-swept moons of Jupiter, embark on a mission. They must make the perilous journey across space, returning once more to the Sun's inner system, from whence their makers sent them centuries ago. It is a vital errand that they have to perform: find the cause of the quantum anomalies that have been detected on Mars and stop them – before the phenomenon destroys the Solar System.

On an Earth radically changed from the world of today, a sparse population of humans persist in an existence that invokes comparison with the Eloi from H.G. Wells's classic *The Time Machine*. Under the watchful supervision of the Voynix, a mysterious race of machine-like sentinels, their lives are devoid of hardship, imagination and purpose. But for Harman, a man in the last year of his allotted century of life, questions remain unanswered. Time is running out for him, and if he intends

to find a reprieve from his final death, he must embark on a journey that will take him beyond the boundaries of his world, discover a forgotten past and reveal a belief-shattering truth.

Thus, three imaginative stories are brought together into a single, sweeping epic of breathtaking proportions in *Ilium* by Dan Simmons (Gollancz, £10.99). However, it should be noted that *Ilium* is only the first part of the story entire (the conclusion, *Olympos*, will follow shortly; I'm very much looking forward to it), and as such, all the threads do not culminate in a tidy knot in the final chapters. Instead the reader is left in high anticipation, with promises of a spectacular final half.

Nevertheless, in *Ilium*, each of the three storylines are, in themselves,





compelling tales of intrigue, wonder and tension, brought to life by fully rounded characters that are effortlessly believable. Their growth, and journey, through the story drew me in with ease, so that it was a joy to share in their triumphs and tragedies (in particular the put-upon Hockenberry and the chubby young man, Daeman, whose reaction to his ongoing plight gave me cause to chuckle frequently).

The narrative, jumping from one subplot to another at the end of every chapter, guides the reader through the story, pausing at opportune moments to view the spectacular scenery, but does not linger overlong on extraneous detail, preferring instead to keep the reader moving along on the relentless current of the plot. However, the depth of the universe that Dan Simmons has created is always in evidence, presented with beautifully succinct description and laced with references

to familiar concepts that seem, somehow, delightfully quirky against the backdrop of his imagination.

If I had to level any criticism at this exciting piece of work, then it would concern elements of plausibility. I found that some of the ideas were a little far-fetched, but – and it is a “but” that overshadows my personal opinion – if probability begins, at times, to fray at the edges, then it is the author’s enormous gift as a storyteller that keeps the reader believing. And, as stated above, this is still an unfinished story and therefore I have faith that Mr Simmons will tie up those frayed edges in the concluding instalment, to the satisfaction of everyone who reads it.

When I was handed this book – and it is a fairly sizable tome – I read the blurb on the back cover and paled at the mention of *The Iliad* and how *Ilium* purports to use Homer’s story as an ongoing theme throughout. I

myself have not read the Greek saga, but I am reliably informed that it is a heavy piece of literature, not to be tackled lightly. Subsequently, I envisioned myself struggling through Dan Simmons’s novel, lost amid a labyrinth of classical references. But I can happily report that my fears were unfounded. It is not necessary for the reader to be familiar with Homer’s writings in order to gain a high level of enjoyment from *Ilium*.

So, I reiterate, the first volume of this two-part epic is huge in scope and imagination, a beautiful sculpture in speculative fiction, drawing reference from the Greek classic as well as from Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* and other works. It is a mystery, a thriller and a deep venture into the inventive consciousness of, for me, one of the most exciting writers of our time. Buy it, read it and enjoy.

Martin Isitt

Contrary to what I assumed in my review last year, *Castles Made of Sand*, the second book of Gwyneth Jones’s Hendrix sequence, is not the middle volume in a trilogy but the second in a series of five. This is a cause for celebration: we get to spend an extra two books in the company of her three rock star heroes – trio, triumvirate, trinity, threesome – Fiorinda, Sage and Ax Preston.

The overall story begins in the near future of a world very similar to our own. All the political woes that beset us now have moved on just a little, but the problem of propagation of viruses over the internet has cascaded into such a disaster on this side of the Atlantic that Britain is cut off from Europe which in turn has been isolated from the USA. This single event brings about equally radical social and political change.

Of the volumes published thus far, *Bold as Love* tells the story of the collapse of civil government in the United Kingdom and its replacement by the rock ‘n’ roll reich and the rise to power of the triumvirate of heroes. *Castles Made of Sand* then details what happens when the anarchic vision of the rock ‘n’ roll reich goes sour, and how our three heroes each nearly die in their individual search for transcendence.

In *Midnight Lamp* (Gollancz, £10.99), the third and current volume of the series, the trio of heroes have become at once so powerful and so damaged by their experiences that, despite their fall from grace in their home country, the isolation of Europe from the USA is breached specifically to allow them to visit. In typical fashion, the three heroes go off at a tangent from what is expected of them, get into terrible tribulations and, in the by-now usual combination of electronic genius, nanophilosophy and magic, win through to a

## If this goes on

Paul Brazier

better understanding of the powers ranged against them and an even stronger position from which to begin the next book.

Yes, I said magic. These are science fiction novels with magic in. But this is no mere Harry Potter wish-fulfilment for grown-ups.

It is in the nature of sf novels to take absurd postulates such as magic and construct a scientifically plausible world where they can exist. Here, Fiorinda comes from a family of witches and has natural magic, Sage is an electronic genius who can build synaesthetic entertainment machines that directly alter an audience’s perception, and Ax Preston is the guitar-hero who has taken the practical mechanical philosophy of Zen-self that was introduced in the first novel and used it to become astonishingly powerful in a largely unknown way, but which allowed him to defeat Fiorinda’s father in the climax of *Bold as Love*.

Forget Harry Potter for adults. This

is much better. Natural magic is only part of the story. The wizardry that is implicit in electronics and nano-technology is combined with both natural magic and human frailties and emotions into two intertwined parallel stories – of a near-future world that is in severe political meltdown but which might well be saved by the actions of our three heroes, and of three heroes whose wonderfully complex love life and deployment of a plethora of counter-cultural ideals might just save a world where the old methods of governance don’t work any more. These books are challengingly intelligent, but well worth the intellectual effort of understanding them. I can’t wait for the next one.

When Mary Gentle’s *Ash: A Secret History* finally hit the bookshops, it quickly became apparent that a masterwork had been committed. Much touted as a fantasy, and emblazoned with all kinds of twee pseudo-Celtic cover art, it also quickly became apparent that this was in fact a solid, if extremely dark and unusual, work of science fiction. The book is dumbfounding in its scope and superb in its execution. The problem, it seemed, would be to find some way to follow it.

Well, in *1610: A Sundial on a Grave* (Gollancz, £16.99) she has equalled the achievement of *Ash*. When the book arrived in the post, I made the mistake of opening it and reading the first few sentences. Three quarters of an hour later I realised I was horribly late for work, but it was worth it.

Unlike with *Ash*, I can’t honestly claim that this novel is science fiction. There is a strong scientific element in it, but the parallels are, bizarrely, with the psychohistory of Isaac Asimov’s *Foundation* novels in that there is a branch of mathematics that predicts the future

and is being used to manipulate the present in order to bring into being a future that is less horrible than the one predicted if nothing is done.

In this, the book resembles *Ash*, as there appear to be a number of possible futures, many of which we recognize some element of. Gentle, however, is far too clever to allow us to settle on any particular version of these futures as the one we inhabit, for that would distract us from her narrative. Instead, she keeps us focused firmly on her story with only the most subtle of pointers as to how the future is going to be.

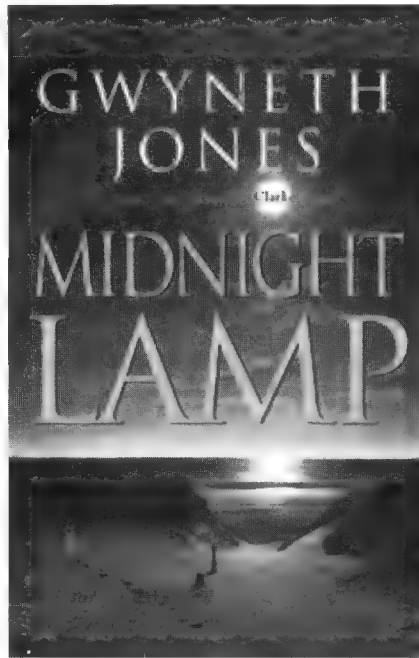
And what a story it is. While the predominant plot device is the attempt to avert a future catastrophe, the characters she deploys in order to tell the story are richly imagined and, as with all her recent characters, deeply flawed. The story begins in Paris with the assassination of King Henri IV of France.

To give an idea of Mary Gentle's storytelling skill, I have no idea whether or not this French king was actually assassinated on the given date, May 14, 1610 – in fact, I have no idea whether or not such a king existed at all. What I do know is that I didn't, and don't, want to check, because it doesn't matter – it isn't that kind of story. What is important is not the event itself but its ramifications into the lives of her characters.

The central character, Rochefort, is a gentleman at court, a famous duellist, and a spy in the service of the most trusted of the king's lieutenants. The king's wife, a Medici, is plotting against the king's life, and Rochefort, in attempting to foil her, brings her plan to fruition. This is only the first of a number of delicious ironies Gentle describes. The next is that in his subsequent escape first into the French countryside around Paris, then to England and then, bizarrely, to Japan and back, he is accompanied for much of the time by his arch enemy. I won't tell any more of the story – Gentle does it so much better than I do – but I will say that I will be surprised if this novel doesn't win a Tip-tree award, as its treatment of gender politics and roles is at once original, enlightening and stunningly relevant to her story.

So, while I can't say the book is science fiction, I can say it is a rip-roaring, intelligent, blood-and-thunder adventure story. In this it partakes of the real roots of science fiction and, as such, is just as much a science-fiction story as anything from the golden age, or, indeed, from our own current "boom" in sf.

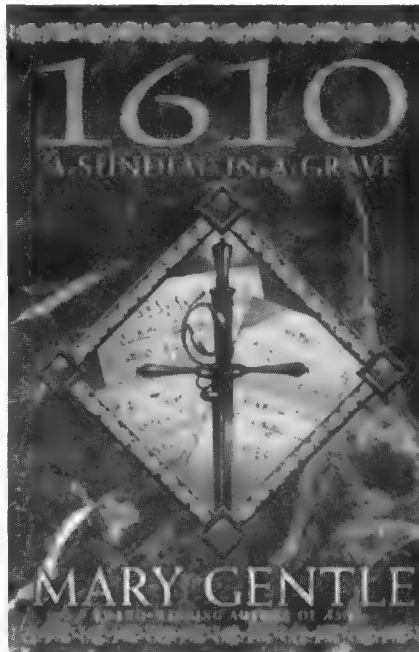
Before I get to the British boom, however, I have another book to look at. In *Bibliomancy* (PS Publishing, £35), Elizabeth Hand delivers exactly what it says on the cover – magic that is almost entirely book-orientated. I really can't imagine these stories being told any other way, not on television, not in



movies, not as comics, not even as interactive games. Perhaps they could be read on the radio, but, even in that most intimate of mediums, there is a sense that the story would not be private enough.

Reading these novellas is like watching your own dreams unfold. There are small things that are so personal that no-one else could possibly know about and so they become part of you almost by osmosis, and there are things that are so painful that you never could actually share them with anyone else.

Each of the stories here concerns some form of magical transformation. The first story, "Cleopatra Brimstone", tells the story of an expatriate American woman in London who is so expert at butterfly collecting that she is allowed to become a helper at the London Zoo in Regents Park. The setting, in and around Cam-



den Lock and Camden High Street is lovingly drawn, it would appear from real life. The magical transformation comes completely as a surprise but features strongly, after it is introduced, throughout the story. Despite its dark ending, I adored this, although I have to say I probably haven't fully understood it yet – or is that why I like it so much? I look forward to going back and finding extra depths.

"Cleopatra Brimstone" is, however, the only dark story here. "Pavane for a Prince of the Air" is such a beautifully told private tale of grief that I felt I was intruding even as I was reading it. The ending, however, is truly uplifting and I felt privileged to be allowed to partake of this emotion.

"Chip Crockett's Christmas Carol" is, for me, the most laboured and least successful tale here. Again we are made privy to a very private tale of distress, this time with an autistic child, but I did feel that the parental angst, once established, could have been left aside instead of being constantly repeated. The denouement, when it comes, is not quite as expected, however, and precisely because of that and the almost interminable details of the problems with the child, is oddly moving. This is the kind of effect that one comes to expect from Liz Hand, and one that makes her one of my favourite novelists.

The final story here, "The Least Trumps," comes from an idea from John Crowley and confirms what I had hitherto only suspected, that Liz Hand holds Crowley in as high regard as I do. In exactly the way the landscape became an integral part of the story of *Little, Big*, so it becomes a part of this tale of a tattoo artist who lives alone in a tiny isolated cottage on the coast of Maine. But, as is also usual with Hand, while the woman is isolated physically, the tendrils of her relationships reach out strongly into the surrounding people and we share with her the love and the perplexity that elderly relatives can make us feel. The magic in this story is, again, very reminiscent of *Little, Big* in that it is almost not there for most of the time and it appears that it is the magic of the landscape alone that is being depicted, but that has always been one of Crowley's greatest achievements in my eyes, and I find it profoundly cheering that there is someone else writing at this level.

We don't often review academic journals here because they plough their own furrow and it is parallel and rather distant from our focus on fiction. However, *Science Fiction Studies* #91 (\$12, SF-TH Inc. at DePauw University) purports to be a first attempt to examine "The British Boom." I place that title in ironic quotation marks because I disagree that any such thing exists and find the essays offered here unfocused,

unconvincing and extremely partial.

The issue begins with an interview by Joan Gordon of China Miéville and as such it is an interesting piece of work. However, it quickly becomes plain that the editors of this magazine see Miéville as somehow embodying or representing the British Boom, whereas the books he has published are no more than some of the more recent representatives of a solid trend in British publishing that has been growing for the past 20 years.

I would expect a critical investigation such as this purports to be to attempt to examine the evidence, all of it, and draw conclusions based on it. Instead of this, we get a hotch-potch of assertions that select their evidence and ignore large tranches of what has happened since 1984.

Following the Miéville interview, there is a farrago entitled "Thirteen Ways of Looking at the British Boom" wherein Andrew M. Butler, having apparently made notes towards an essay, then finds that he can't make a coherent essay out of those notes but doesn't want to waste all that work so publishes the notes undigested.

The point apparently being made is that, unlike the New Wave, there is no one movement that has given rise to this "boom"; there are just an extraordinarily diverse number of different people who have all made it happen. This collection of undigested nuggets concludes with Butler quoting largely from his own work elsewhere which only reveals how self-referential the whole process has been.

Next up, Mark Bould makes a brave stab at linking the "Boom" to the *Doctor Who* milieu and media sf in general. This is an interesting point of view. There is certainly a stream of continuity that can't be ignored identified here and I would have liked to see more.

However, instead, it is followed by Roger Luckhurst trying to claim that the "boom" is somehow a product of the Labour government's cultural governance. He makes an interesting case, but the current "boom" features mostly writers who were already active when Labour came to power, so while the government may have encouraged a pre-existing trend, it seems ridiculous to claim that they are responsible for it, however in favour of them you might be.

Matt Hills now offers an intriguing look at counterfictions in Kim Newman's work. Again, there is a lot to think about here, but precious little to do with the boom and also precious little to do with science fiction. I like Kim Newman and I think he is a fine writer but I have read few of his books because I often don't understand the post-modern cultural references in them. I would have put him down as a horror writer but Hills claims his rewritings of Robert Louis Stevenson's Jekyll and Hyde story

mean he is reinventing Gothic SF as a counterfactual or, to use the more familiar term, a parallel world. All very interesting but not my idea of science fiction and certainly not central to "the boom."

Joan Gordon returns with a long essay on China Miéville. Were they really so short of material that they had to feature the same author examined by the same critic twice? Perhaps so, because the next piece is the text of a largely autobiographical talk given by Stephen Baxter about baby boomers. It is fascinating in itself but adds little to the debate about "the British Boom."

Finally, Andy Butler and Mark Bould offer a selection of comments from other leading lights in British science fiction, a kind of letter column before the fact, and most of the penetrating comments that appear in this publication appear here. The section closes with a long list of writings that might or might not be considered part of the boom.

And I threw my hands up in despair. It is mentioned several times that the definition of science fiction that *Science Fiction Studies* uses has been revamped recently to allow more discussion of related works such as fantasy and horror. However, this reading list and the previous list of authors who might be deemed to be part of "the boom" seems determined to rope in every single author who has published anything even vaguely fantastic from the past twenty years and, by excluding nothing, effectively fails to draw any kind of boundary around its subject area.

Its sins of inclusion, however, are massively overwhelmed by its sins of omissions. To fail to examine the role of Peter F. Hamilton in starting the snowball rolling is to ignore the core powerhouse of the current success of science fiction in Britain. Equally, to overlook Ian M. Banks is to dismiss an extraordinary talent who has succeeded in bridging the gulf between mainstream and

science fiction and insisted that each side take the other seriously. And to pass over Alastair Reynolds is miss the prime example of what they are talking about, not a boom, but the emergence into notice of a long-established steady growth, a simple resurgence in science fiction in Britain.

But their sins are more heinous even than that. Much is made throughout this publication of the fragmentary nature of what they are trying to discuss. Of course it's fragmentary: they've pulled in everything they can find that might be labelled fantastic in any way in order to justify talking about works of fantasy as being at the centre of their subject where they should have been talking about works of science fiction.

They got closest to understanding what they were doing when they discussed cultural continuity. The editors, the people who buy books that then sell, they are the ones who have made this happen and they are the products and manifestations of that cultural continuity. There are far too many to name them all, but certain names spring immediately to mind – Malcolm Edwards, John Jarrold, Jane Johnson, Peter Lavery, Cathy Gale who originally encouraged Peter F. Hamilton and, of course, our own David Pringle – have been there, soldiering on, largely unacknowledged outside the trade, but doing the work that has made modern British science fiction the success it is.

For many, John W. Campbell editing *Astounding/Analog* characterizes the Golden Age of science fiction while Michael Moorcock and *New Worlds* does the same for the New Wave. But this new movement, this so-called British Boom, is not magazine-focused at all. Of course, *Interzone* has launched the careers of many novelists from Stephen Baxter, Richard Calder and Greg Egan to, latterly, Liz Williams, and it is difficult to assess accurately how much influence the fact that there was a home-grown professional magazine market has had – certainly, several of the new writers that I have introduced here are now producing and submitting novels to publishers and I have high hopes for them – but most of this new resurgence is novel-based and it is sad to have to acknowledge that perhaps the magazine as the guiding light of a generation of novelists has had its day.

Nevertheless, to ignore the work of the editors in the trade today is quite simply to ignore the reason there is anything that could be termed a boom. This issue of *Science Fiction Studies* adds nothing to our understanding of where it came from or where it is going. If you want real insight, look rather to the historical record of *Interzone* to give you some notion of what might have caused today's boom. David Pringle should be proud.

Paul Brazier



This is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by Interzone during the period specified. Official publication dates, where known, are given in italics at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

Anderson, Douglas A., ed. **Tales Before Tolkien: The Roots of Modern Fantasy.** Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-45855-9, 436pp, trade paperback, cover by John Howe, \$14.95. (Fantasy anthology, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen], priced at \$27.95; this splendid historical selection of fantasies, chosen and annotated by a leading Tolkien scholar, consists of stories written before 1937, the year J.R.R. Tolkien published *The Hobbit*; the authors, most of whom may have had some influence on JRRT himself, include John Buchan, James Branch Cabell, Lord Dunsany, Richard Garnett, H. Rider Haggard, William Hope Hodgson, Clemence Housman, Andrew Lang, David Lindsay, George MacDonald, Arthur Machen, A. Merritt, Kenneth Morris, William Morris, E. Nesbit, Frank R. Stockton, Ludwig Tieck and Austin Tappan Wright; there are some rarities here; recommended.) *September 2003.*

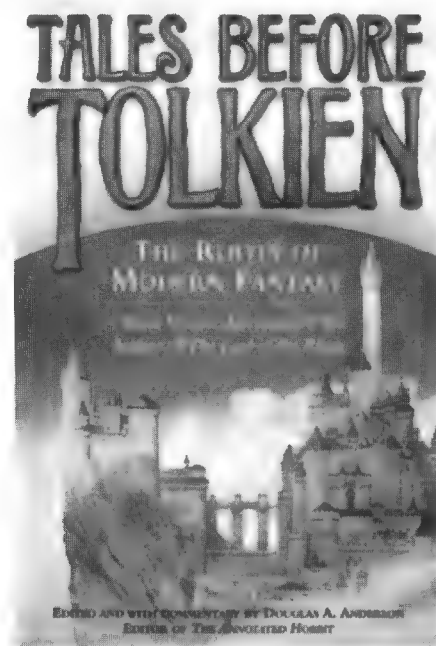
Bailey, Dale. **The Resurrection Man's Legacy.** Introduction by Barry N. Malzberg. Golden Gryphon Press [3002 Perkins Rd., Urbana, IL 61802, USA], ISBN 1-930846-22-3, xii+332pp, hardcover, cover by John Picacio, \$24.95. (Horror/sf collection, first edition; Bailey is a newish American writer who has been publishing for about a decade, and this is his first book of fiction; it contains 11 stories, reprinted in the main from *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*; it's yet another attractively-designed volume from Golden Gryphon, their 30th book; to order, see the publishers' website: [www.goldengryphon.com](http://www.goldengryphon.com).) *November 2003.*

Barr, Marlene S., ed. **Envisioning the Future: Science Fiction and the Next Millennium.** Wesleyan University Press, ISBN 0-8195-6652-7, xxi+205pp, trade paperback, cover by Mandy Sand, \$22.95. (Anthology of essays and fictional pieces about sf and the new millennium; first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen], priced at \$65; contributors include Harlan Ellison, James Gunn, Walter Mosley, Patrick Parrinder, Marge Piercy, Neil Postman, Eric S. Rabkin, Kim Stanley Robinson, Pamela Sargent, Darko Suvin and George Zebrowski; with its straightforward, almost old-fashioned title, and with its high proportion of well-known professional sf writers among the contributors, this seems to be pitched more towards a "popular" audience than most such gatherings of papers from an academic press.) *3rd September 2003.*

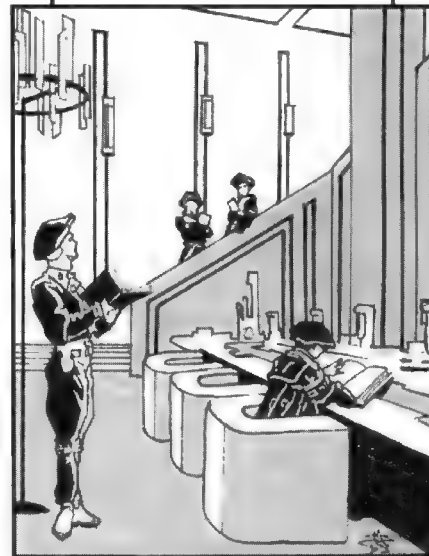
Bisson, Terry. **Dear Abbey.** Introduction by Brian W. Aldiss. PS Publishing [Hamilton House, 4 Park Ave., Harrogate, N. Yorks. HG2 9BQ], ISBN 1-902880-75-7, 108pp, small-press trade paperback, cover by Edward Miller, £10. (Sf novella, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen], priced at £25; it's a signed edition, limited to 500 numbered paperback copies and 300 numbered hardcover copies; it concerns time travel to the far future, and Brian Aldiss thinks it might be a masterpiece.) *Late entry: August publication, received in September 2003.*

Blum, Jonathan, and Kate Orman. **Fallen Gods.** Foreword by Storm Constantine. Frontispiece by Daryl Joyce. "Doctor Who Novellas." Telos Publishing [61 Elgar Ave., Tolworth, Surrey KT5 9JP], 1-903889-21-9, 147pp, hardcover, £25. (Sf/fantasy TV-series spinoff novella, first edition; there is a simultaneous standard edition [hardcover; not seen], priced at £10; the limited "deluxe edition" which has been sent as a review copy is signed by author, illustrator and foreword-writer; this is the tenth in a series of handsomely-produced "Doctor Who" novellas from Telos; for ordering information see their website: [www.telos.co.uk](http://www.telos.co.uk).) *25th September 2003.*

Brotherton, Mike. **Star Dragon.** Tor, ISBN 0-765-30758-8, 352pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; despite its rather clichéd-sounding title, this is definitely *hard sf*, of the heavily astrophysical, deep-space sort; it's by a new American writer who has a PhD in astronomy and has since worked in research; he is "the author of nearly 50 scientific articles in refereed journals"; a would-be successor to the late Robert L. Forward, perhaps?) *8th October 2003.*



## BOOKS RECEIVED



SEP/OCT  
2003

Bukatman, Scott. **Matters of Gravity: Special Effects and Supermen in the 20th Century.** Duke University Press, ISBN 0-8223-3119-5, xvi+279pp, trade paperback, cover by Howard Chaykin and Leslie Zahler, £16.95. (Collection of essays on aspects of contemporary sf and fantasy; first edition; illustrated with 16 pages of colour plates; by the well-established author of an earlier, somewhat similar, academic tome, *Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject in Postmodern Science Fiction* [1993], this concentrates mainly on sf/fantasy films and comics, although some of the pieces range more widely; the essay "Gibson's Typewriter," on William Gibson, is here, and other writers of note are alluded to; recommended to those who are interested in the serious, postmodernist approaches to the sf genre and its allied creative fields.) *November 2003.*

Campbell, Ramsey. **The Darkest Part of the Woods.** Tor, ISBN 0-765-30766-9, 364pp, hardcover, cover by David Bowers, \$24.95. (Horror novel, first published in the UK, 2002; this, by "the world's most honored living horror writer," was originally published at a much higher price by the small press PS Publishing; reviewed by Matt Hills in *Interzone* 179; here, the Library of Congress cataloguing-in-publication descriptives, given in small print on the reverse of the title page, summarize the novel intriguingly: "1. Forests and forestry – Fiction; 2. Mushrooms, Hallucinogenic – Fiction; 3. Paternal deprivation – Fiction; 4. Fathers, Death – Fiction; 5. Widows – Fiction; 6. Cults – Fiction.") *20th October 2003.*





Carey, Jacqueline. **Kushiel's Chosen.** Tor (UK), ISBN 1-4050-0588-2, 700pp, C-format paperback, cover by John Jude Palencar, £12.99. (Historical fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2002; follow-up to *Kushiel's Dart* [2001], by one of the newer American writers [born 1964], it's another bonecrusher of a Big Commercial Fantasy.) 19th September 2003.

Carey, Jacqueline. **Kushiel's Dart.** Tor (UK), ISBN 0-330-49374-4, 1015pp, A-format paperback, cover by John Jude Palencar, £7.99. (Historical fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2001; the opening volume in the series, set in "a skewed Renaissance world.") 5th September 2003.

Cochran, Molly. **The Third Magic.** Tor/Forge, ISBN 0-312-86440-X, 364pp, hardcover, cover by Tristan Elwell, \$24.95. (Arthurian fantasy novel, first edition; this is the third in a long-spun-out trilogy which began with *The Forever King* [1992] and *The Broken Sword* [1997]; the first two books were written in collaboration with Warren Murphy.) 10th September 2003.

Cornell, Paul, ed. **Professor Bernice Summerfield: Life During Wartime.** Big Finish [PO Box 1127, Maidenhead SL6 3LW], ISBN 1-84435-062-2, 202pp, hardcover, cover by Adrian Salmon, £14.99. (Shared-world sf anthology, first edition; this is a follow-up to the earlier anthology, *Professor Bernice Summerfield: A Life of Surprises* [2002]; starring the space heroine created by Paul Cornell, it contains all-original short stories by a swarm of the usual Doctor-Whovian suspects: Jonathan Blum, Martin Day, Paul Ebbs, Jim Mortimore, Kate Orman, Justin Richards, Dave Stone and many others.) September 2003.

Crichton, Michael. **Timeline.** "Now a major film." Arrow, ISBN 0-09-945792-X, xiii+496pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1999; Crichton's scientific thriller before last, aimed as usual at the mainstream audience, this is the one on the theme of time-travel back to the 14th century; it's a film tie-in reissue.) 6th November 2003.

Datlow, Ellen, ed. **The Dark: New Ghost Stories.** Tor, ISBN 0-765-30444-9, 379pp, hardcover, \$25.95. (Horror anthology, first edition; it contains all-new stories in an atmospheric ghostly vein by Jack Cady, Ramsey Campbell, Terry Dowling, Jeffrey Ford, Stephen Gallagher, Charles L. Grant, Kathe Koja, Tanith Lee, Sharyn McCrumb, Joyce Carol Oates, Lucius Shepard, Gahan Wilson and a few others; it looks to be splendid, solid stuff – the best of its kind that money can buy.) 29th October 2003.

Dick, Philip K. **Time Out of Joint.** "SF Masterworks, 55." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07458-2, 220pp, B-format paperback, cover by Chris Moore, £6.99. (Sf novel, first

published in the USA, 1959; an early Dick classic about illusion and reality, this edition contains an afterword by Lou Stathis, dating from 1984.) 11th September 2003.

Dick, Philip K. **The World Jones Made.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07457-4, 199pp, B-format paperback, cover by Chris Moore, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1956; this is another of Gollancz's attractive reissues of Dick's earliest novels – essential to completists.) 9th October 2003.

Dicks, Terrance, and Barry Letts. **Deadly Reunion.** "Doctor Who." BBC, 0-563-48610-4, 287pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first edition; featuring the Third Doctor, with Jo Grant, the Brigadier and UNIT.) 3rd November 2003.

Doctorow, Cory. **A Place So Foreign and Eight More: Stories.** Introduction by Bruce Sterling. Four Walls Eight Windows [39 West 14th St., Room 503, New York, NY 10011, USA], ISBN 1-56858-286-2, 243pp, trade paperback, \$13.95. (Sf collection, first edition; a debut collection by the Canadian author who won the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer in 2000, it contains nine lively and inventive stories; one of them, "The Rebranding of Billy Bailey," here retitled "To Market, to Market," originally appeared in *Interzone* 158, August 2000.) 16th September 2003.

Farrer, Matthew. **Crossfire.** "Warhammer 40,000. A Shira Calpurnia Novel." Games Workshop/Black Library 1-84416-020-3, 320pp, A-format paperback, cover by Clint Langley, £5.99. (Sf/fantasy role-playing game spinoff novel, first edition; this is a debut novel by an Australian writer [born 1970] who has contributed short stories to GW's *Inferno!* magazine.) September 2003.



Féval, Paul. **The Vampire Countess.** Translated, annotated and introduced by Brian Stableford. Black Coat Press [PO Box 17270, Encino, CA 91416, USA], ISBN 0-9740711-5-3, 351pp, trade paperback, cover by Ladronn, \$22.95. (Horror novel, originally published in France as *La Vampire*, 1856; first edition in English; this is a little-known example of French "feuilleton" literature – i.e. the daily newspaper serials which were so popular and so numerous in mid-19th-century Parisian publishing; Paul Féval [1816-1887] was perhaps the third best-known of the great *feuilletonists*, following Alexandre Dumas and Eugène Sue; simultaneous with this new book, the same publisher has also reissued two earlier, shorter Stableford translations of Féval, *Vampire City* [originally Sarob Press, 1999], at \$19.95, and *Knightshade* [originally Sarob Press, 2000?], at \$16.95; recommended to the curious.) October 2003.

Finch, Sheila. **Reading the Bones.** Tachyon Publications [1459 18th St., #139, San Francisco, CA 94107, USA], ISBN 1-892391-08-2, 197pp, trade paperback, cover by Michael Dashow, \$14.95. (Sf novel, first edition; by a British-born author long resident in California, it's an expansion of her Nebula Award-winning novella of the same title.) 15th October 2003.

Fisher, Jude. **The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King: Visual Companion.** HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-711626-8, 70pp, very large-format hardcover, £14.99. (Copiously illustrated companion to the "peoples and places" in Peter Jackson's third movie based on J. R. R. Tolkien's great fantasy novel; first edition; "Jude Fisher" is a pseudonym of HarperCollins editor Jane Johnson, who has also co-written novels as "Gabriel King") 6th November 2003.

Forward, Simon A. **Emotional Chemistry.** "Doctor Who." BBC, 0-563-48608-2, 274pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first edition; featuring the Eighth Doctor – and Napoleon Bonaparte's advance on Moscow.) 6th October 2003.

Furth, Robin. **Stephen King's The Dark Tower: A Concordance, Volume 1.** Foreword by Stephen King. Hodder & Stoughton, ISBN 0-340-83062-X, xxx+358pp, hardcover, £12.99. (Alphabetical who's who and what's what of King's projected seven-volume heroic fantasy series [see below, under Stephen King]; first published in the USA [?], 2003; there are various appendices and maps; the author has worked as a research assistant to King since 2001.) 1st October 2003.

Galopin, Arnould. **Doctor Omega: A Classic Tale of Space and Time.** Adapted and retold in English by Jean-Marc & Randy Lofficier. Foreword by Terrance Dicks. Black Coat Press [PO Box 17270,

Encino, CA 91416, USA], ISBN 0-9740711-1-0, 257pp, trade paperback, cover by Rapeno, \$19.95. (Sf novel, first published in France as *Le Docteur Oméga*, 1906; it includes over 20 black-and-white illustrations from the original French edition; the author [1865-1934] is described as "among Jules Verne's most talented successors," and his novel concerns a voyage to Mars by the eponymous Doctor and a companion; recommended as a curiosity in the history of sf; this attractive, well-printed and handy-sized paperback is the first publication of Black Coat Press, a new imprint set up by Jean-Marc and Randy Lofficier in California in order to publish translations from the French – a venture well worth supporting; for further information see the website, [www.blackcoatpress.com](http://www.blackcoatpress.com).) September 2003.

Garth, John. **Tolkien and the Great War: The Threshold of Middle-earth.** HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-711952-6, xviii+398pp, hardcover, £20. (Partial biography and critical study of the great English fantasy writer, J. R. R. Tolkien, focusing on his experience of the First World War; first edition; by a new journalist-author with an Oxford academic background, this looks to be an interesting and original work; it is the product of "five years of research," and it's illustrated with eight pages of photographs.) 9th November 2003.

Gerber, Michael. **Barry Trotter and the Unnecessary Sequel.** "The book nobody has been waiting for." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07558-9, 328pp, small-format hardcover, cover by Douglas Carrel, £6.99. (Parodic fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2003; a follow-up to *Barry Trotter and the Shameless Parody* [2001], this is another take-off on *You Know Who*, in which "Barry Trotter, now 38 [going on 11] has returned to the Hogwash School of Wizardry and Witchcrap.") 18th September 2003.

Grant, John, and Elizabeth Humphrey, with Pamela D. Scoville. **The Chesley Awards for Science Fiction & Fantasy Art: A Retrospective.** AAPPL [Artists' and Photographers' Press Ltd, 10 Hillside, London SW19 4NH], ISBN 1-904332-10-2, 192pp, large-format hardcover, £30. (Sf/fantasy art portfolio, first edition; lavishly illustrated in colour, with over 300 pictures, it contains "a retrospective of nearly two decades of award-winning work by the world's finest science fiction and fantasy artists"; the annual awards in question were established in 1985, in the name of renowned space artist Chesley Bonestell; this new publishing house, AAPPL – pronounced "apple"? – seems to be the successor to Paper Tiger.) "Autumn" 2003.

Haber, Karen, ed. **Meditations on Middle-earth.** "New writings on the worlds of J. R. R. Tolkien." Illustrated by John Howe. Earthlight, ISBN 0-7434-6874-0, xvi+235pp, B-format paperback, cover by Howe, £6.99.

(Essay anthology devoted to Tolkien's fantasy, first published in the USA, 2001; this is a packaged book from Byron Preiss Visual Publications, Inc., illustrated throughout with black-and-white pencil drawings by Canadian artist and Tolkien specialist John Howe; it contains commissioned essays by the late Poul Anderson [the book is dedicated to his memory], Orson Scott Card, Charles de Lint, Raymond E. Feist, Esther Friesner, "Robin Hobb," Lisa Goldstein, Ursula Le Guin, George R. R. Martin, Terry Pratchett, Michael Swanwick, Harry Turtledove, Terry Windling and others; one of the most solid and well-informed pieces is by Tolkien critic and editor Douglas A. Anderson; ironically, given Tolkien's extreme "Englishness," only Mr Pratchett flies the flag for the UK; reviewed by Paul Brazier in *Interzone* 175.) 3rd November 2003.

Haining, Peter, ed. **Magician's Circle: More Spellbinding Stories of Wizards and Wizardry.** Souvenir Press, ISBN 0-285-63681-2, 270pp, hardcover, cover by Arnaud Crémet, £9.99. (Juvenile fantasy anthology, first edition; a follow-up to an earlier anthology, *The Wizards' Den* [which we didn't see], it contains reprinted stories by, among others, L. Frank Baum, Peter S. Beagle, Ray Bradbury, Roald Dahl, Charles Dickens, Alan Garner, Ursula Le Guin, George MacDonald, E. Nesbit, William F. Nolan, Philip Pullman, Sylvia Townsend Warner, H. G. Wells and Jacqueline Wilson.) 23rd October 2003.

Haining, Peter, ed. **The Wizard's Den: Spellbinding Stories of Magic and Magicians.** Souvenir Press, ISBN 0-285-63677-4, 255pp, B-format paperback, cover by Antony Wooten, £6.99. (Juvenile fantasy anthology, first published in the UK, 2001; it contains reprinted stories by, among others, Joan Aiken, Ray Bradbury, Roald Dahl, Alan Garner, Russell Hoban, Diana Wynne Jones, E. Nesbit, William F. Nolan, Philip Pullman,



Manly Wade Wellman, Jacqueline Wilson and John Wyndham; as usual, Haining goes for the familiar big names.) 23rd October 2003.

Haldeman, Joe. **All My Sins Remembered.** "Gollancz SF Collectors' Editions." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07281-4, 184pp, C-format paperback, cover by Chris Moore, £9.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1977; concerning interstellar politics, memory and manipulation, it's an episodic work "fixed-up" from three novellas which had appeared in 1970s sf magazines.) 16th October 2003.

Hand, Elizabeth. **Bibliomancy: Four Novellas.** Introduction by Lucius Shepard. PS Publishing [Hamilton House, 4 Park Ave., Harrogate, N. Yorks. HG2 9BQ], ISBN 1-902880-73-0, 296pp, hardcover, cover by John Anster Fitzgerald, £35. (Horror/fantasy collection, first edition; there is a simultaneous "deluxe" edition [not seen], priced at £60; this is a signed edition, limited to 500 numbered hardcover copies and 200 slipcased copies; it contains four reprinted novellas: "Cleopatra Brimstone," "Pavane for a Prince of the Air," "Chip Crockett's Christmas Carol" and "The Least Trumps.") October 2003.

Herniman, Marcus. **The Fall of Lautun.** "Book Three of the Arrandin Trilogy." Earthlight, 0-7434-1512-4, 493pp, A-format paperback, cover by Chris Moore, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; the third novel by this British writer – follow-up, after another long gap, to *The Siege of Arrandin* [July 1999] and *The Treason of Dortrean* [October 2001].) 6th October 2003.

Hirshberg, Glen. **The Two Sams: Ghost Stories.** Introduction by Ramsey Campbell. Carroll & Graf, ISBN 0-7867-1255-4, xi+210pp, hardcover, \$23. (Horror collection, first edition; it contains five long stories by an up-and-coming writer who lives in Los Angeles; Ramsey Campbell's intro begins: "Sometimes just one book can be enough to confirm the presence of a major talent in the field of the supernatural tale..."; he goes on to mention M.R. James, Fritz Leiber and Thomas Ligotti, and he concludes: "Hirshberg [is] an original and considerable talent, and I'm proud to be associated with his book.") 31st October 2003.

Hobb, Robin. **The Golden Fool: The Tawny Man, II.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-648602-9, 712pp, A-format paperback, cover by John Howe, £7.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2002; Robin Hobb [aka Megan Lindholm] has a large and enthusiastic following.) 6th October 2003.

Hoyt, Sarah A. **Any Man So Daring.** Ace, ISBN 0-441-01092-X, 327pp, hardcover, cover by Judy York, \$23.95. (Historical fantasy novel, first edition; conclusion of the trilogy begun with *Ill Met by Moonlight* [2001] and *All Night Awake* [2002], in which this

Portuguese-born American writer [Sarah de Almeida Hoyt] has the temerity to tackle the subject of young Will Shakespeare in the land of Faerie.) *November 2003.*

Hunter, Kim. **Scabbard's Song: Book Three of the Red Pavilions.** Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-187-X, 330pp, C-format paperback, £10.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; set in "the troubled kingdom of Zamerkand," it's a follow-up to *Knight's Dawn* [2001] and *Wizard's Funeral* [2002].) *November 2003.*

Johnson, Kij. **Fudoki.** Tor, ISBN 0-765-30390-6, 316pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; it's set in the same ancient Japanese world as the author's one earlier novel, *The Fox Woman* [2000].) *October 2003.*

Jones, Gwyneth. **Midnight Lamp.** Frontispiece by Bryan Talbot. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07470-1, 326pp, hardcover, cover by Anne Sudworth, £17.99. (Sf/fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; there is a simultaneous C-format paperback edition priced at £10.99; conclusion of the near-future rock'n'roll fantastical trilogy begun with the Arthur C. Clarke Award-winning *Bold as Love* [2001] and continued with *Castles Made of Sand* [2002].) *20th November 2003.*

Jones, Stephen, ed. **The Mammoth Book of Best New Horror: Volume Fourteen.** Robinson, ISBN 1-84119-794-7, xi+590pp, B-format paperback, cover by Les Edwards, £7.99. (Horror anthology, first edition; it contains reprint stories, all from the year 2002, by Ramsey Campbell, Basil Copper, Neil Gaiman, Stephen Gallagher, Glen Hirshberg, Brian Hodge, Graham Joyce, Caitlin R. Kiernan, Kelly Link, Paul McAuley, China Miéville, Kim Newman, Nicholas Royle, Jay Russell, David J. Schow, Jeff VanderMeer and others; there's also a lengthy, fact-filled introduction and the usual ghoulish "Necrology"; recommended.) *30th October 2003.*

Jones, Stephen, ed. **By Moonlight Only.** Illustrated by Randy Broecker. PS Publishing [Hamilton House, 4 Park Ave., Harrogate, N. Yorks. HG2 9BQ], ISBN 1-902880-71-4, 293pp, hardcover, cover by Edward Miller, £35. (Horror anthology, first edition; there is a simultaneous "deluxe" edition [not seen], priced at £60; this is a signed edition, limited to 500 numbered hardcover copies and unspecified number of slipcased copies; billed as "the second volume of the new 'Not at Night' series" [in homage to Christine Campbell Thomson's original "Not at Night" anthology series of the 1920s and '30s], this is a follow-up to *Keep Out the Night* [2002]; it contains ten stories, most of them reprints but two original, by David Case, Hugh B. Cave, Harlan Ellison, Christopher Fowler, Joe R. Lansdale, Marc Laidlaw, Terry Lamsley, Tanith Lee, Peter Straub and Lisa Tuttle; like the previous

volume, it's an attractive book, with a deliberate old-time feel.) *September 2003.*

Jordan, Robert. **Crossroads of Twilight: Book Ten of The Wheel of Time.** Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-183-7, xi+817pp, A-format paperback, £7.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in 2003; "Robert Jordan" is a pseudonym for James Rigney, Jr; you can tell that the author has become a serious commercial property when the publishers start giving his books drab non-pictorial covers and just rely on the byline – ROBERT JORDAN – to sell the brand-name product, Stephen King-wise.) *November 2003.*

Keyes, Greg. **The Final Prophecy.** "Star Wars: The New Jedi Order." Arrow/LucasBooks, ISBN 0-09-941043-5, xiii+305pp, A-format paperback, cover by Terese Nielsen, £6.99. (Sf movie spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 2003.) *2nd October 2003.*

King, Stephen. **The Waste Lands: The Dark Tower, III.** Illustrated by Ned Dameron. New English Library, ISBN 0-340-82977-X, xvi+584pp, B-format paperback, cover by Larry Rostant, £7.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1991; this edition carries the same new introduction, dated 2003, as the recent reissues of the first and second volumes in the series.) *15th September 2003.*

King, Stephen. **Wizard and Glass: The Dark Tower, IV.** Illustrated by Dave McKean. New English Library, ISBN 0-340-82978-8, xxviii+845pp, B-format paperback, cover by Larry Rostant, £7.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1997; this edition carries the same new introduction as the recent reissues of the first, second and third volumes in the series.) *1 October 2003.*

King, Stephen. **Wolves of the Calla: The Dark Tower, V.** Illustrated by Bernie Wrightson. Hodder & Stoughton, ISBN 0-

340-82715-7, xv+616pp, hardcover, cover by Larry Rostant, £25. (Fantasy novel, first edition [?]; probably a simultaneous first with the US edition, as seems to be the custom with the release of King's books; here he returns to his long-gestating quest epic [see above] – now projected to run to seven volumes – loosely based on Robert Browning's poem "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came.") *4th November 2003.*

Kurtz, Katherine. **In the King's Service.** "A Novel of the Deryni." Ace, ISBN 0-441-01060-1, 359pp, hardcover, cover by Matt Stawicki, \$23.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; a new addition, the first in several years, to this Welsh-flavoured heroic fantasy series which has been running for more than three decades.) *November 2003.*

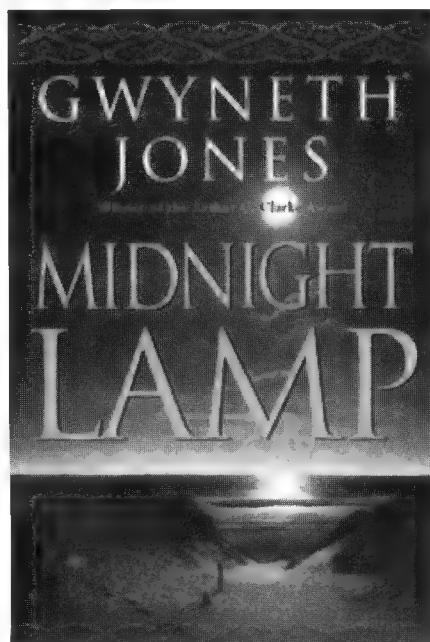
Lackey, Mercedes. **Exile's Valor: A Novel of Valdemar.** DAW, ISBN 0-7564-0206-9, 402pp, hardcover, cover by Jody A. Lee, \$24.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; follow-up to *Exile's Honour* [2002], and the latest in the vast "Heralds of Valdemar" series, it's dedicated to yet more of the rescue-service workers "lost 9/11/01" – they are all listed by name.) *November 2003.*

Lackey, Mercedes, and James Mallory. **The Outstretched Shadow: The Obsidian Trilogy, Book One.** Tor, ISBN 0-765-30219-5, 604pp, hardcover, cover by Todd Lockwood, \$27.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; more bog-standard Big Commercial Fantasy from the super-prolific Lackey, this time working in collaboration with the mysterious James Mallory [he is a "classical scholar" and "professional ghostwriter" based in New York, we are told].) *21st October 2003.*

Lee, Samantha. **Demon.** "Point Horror." Scholastic, ISBN 0-439-97891-2, 256pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Juvenile horror novel, first edition.) *September 2003.*

Little, Denise, ed. **The Sorcerer's Academy.** DAW, ISBN 0-7564-0157-7, 350pp, A-format paperback, \$6.99. (Shared-world fantasy anthology, first edition; it contains 15 all-original stories about a school of magic, by Rosemary Edghill, P. N. Elrod, Laura Anne Gilman, Jody Lynn Nye, Mel Odom, Laura Resnick, Robert Sheckley, Josepha Sherman, Michelle West and others; this is, in effect, another issue of the ongoing DAW Books/Martin H. Greenberg paperback "pulp magazine" [although he's not named as co-editor, the copyright is shared by Tekno Books, which is Greenberg's company].) *September 2003.*

Luceno, James. **The Unifying Force.** "Star Wars: The New Jedi Order." Century/LucasBooks, ISBN 1-8441-3368-0, xi+529pp, hardcover, cover by Cliff Nielsen, £17.99. (Sf movie spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 2003; this, perhaps the biggest *Star Wars* novel ever, is described as the "explosive conclusion" to the "New Jedi Order" sub-series.) *6th November 2003.*



McDevitt, Jack. **Omega.** Ace, ISBN 0-441-01046-6, 438pp, hardcover, cover by Danilo Ducak, \$23.95. (Sf novel, first edition; as we said of his last book, *Chindi* [2002], this is yet another hard-sf, outer-space-set novel of scientific mystery and adventure from the solidly old-fashioned but popular Mr McDevitt – “the logical heir of Isaac Asimov and Arthur C. Clarke,” according to his admirer Stephen King.) *November 2003.*

McIntosh, Neil. **Taint of Evil.** “Warhammer. A Stefan Kumansky Novel.” Games Workshop/Black Library, ISBN 1-84416-045-9, 319pp, A-format paperback, cover by Clint Langley, £5.99. (Fantasy role-playing game spinoff novel, first edition; follow-up to *Star of Erengard* [2002], this is the second novel by a Brighton-resident writer [born 1957] who has co-written book reviews for *Interzone* with Neil Jones.) *October 2003.*

McKinley, Robin. **Sunshine.** Bantam Press, ISBN 0-593-05102-5, 389pp, C-format paperback, cover by Larry Rostant, £10.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2003; this appears to be an adult novel, about vampirism, by the well-known British-resident American children’s author; Neil Gaiman commends it on the front cover: “Astonishing... a perfect work of magical literature.”) *1st October 2003.*

Mitchell, Sandy. **For the Emperor.** “Warhammer 40,000. A Ciaphas Cain Novel.” Games Workshop/Black Library, ISBN 1-84416-050-5, 395pp, A-format paperback, cover by Clint Langley, £5.99. (Sf/fantasy role-playing game spinoff novel, first edition; “Sandy Mitchell” is a pseudonym of Alex Stewart [born 1958], an *Interzone* discovery of many years ago; this, his first novel for GW, appears to be a humorous spoof.) *October 2003.*

Modesitt, L. E., Jr. **The Ethos Effect.** Tor, ISBN 0-765-30802-9, 509pp, hardcover, cover by David Seeley, \$27.95. (Sf novel, first edition; a bulky new space opera from the ultra-prolific Modesitt, it’s set in the universe of his earlier novel *The Parafaith War* [1997] – but two centuries later.) *15th October 2003.*

Modesitt, L. E., Jr. **Legacies: The First Book of the Corean Chronicles.** Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-252-3, 634pp, A-format paperback, cover by Lee Gibbons, £7.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2002; the beginning of a new series from Modesitt, it’s set in a world where a magical catastrophe has caused the fall of a great worldwide civilization.) *October 2003.*

Moon, Elizabeth. **Trading in Danger.** “Book One of Yatta’s War.” Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-168-3, 420pp, A-format paperback, cover by Fred Gambino, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 2003; about a young woman trader in space, this is the first of “an explosive new science-fiction adventure series” by the popular author of

the seven-volume “Serrano Legacy” space-opera series.) *November 2003.*

Moorcock, Michael. **The Lives and Times of Jerry Cornelius: Stories of the Comic Apocalypse.** Four Walls Eight Windows [39 West 14th St., Room 503, New York, NY 10011, USA], ISBN 1-56858-273-0, vii+273pp, trade paperback, \$15. (Sf/fantasy collection, first edition in this format, with the present subtitle; earlier, slimmer editions first appeared in the UK in 1976 and 1987; this edition has been expanded with four recent stories: “The Spencer Inheritance,” “The Camus Connection,” “Cheering for the Rockets” [originally published in *Interzone*, 1999] and the novella *Firing the Cathedral* [also released as a separate slim book by PS Publishing – reviewed by William Thompson in *IZ* 188]; there is a new three-page author’s introduction.) *27th October 2003.*

Parker, K. J. **Memory: The Scavenger Trilogy, Book Three.** Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-172-1, 572pp, A-format paperback, cover by David Wyatt, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2003; it follows *Shadow* [2001] and *Pattern* [2002], and concludes the trilogy.) *2nd October 2003.*

Pratchett, Terry. **Night Watch.** “A Discworld novel.” Corgi, ISBN 0-552-14899-7, 474pp, A-format paperback, cover by Paul Kidby, £6.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2002; the 27th “Discworld” novel, it concerns Commander Sam Vimes of the Ankh-Morpork City Watch and his involvement in a time-travel caper; the accompanying publicity sheet quotes from an A. S. Byatt review: “Part of Pratchett’s genius is in the way he can stand, eternally surprised and benignly amused, outside being human and report back to us on the almost

unimaginable unlikelihood of our existence”; reviewed by Matt Hills in *Interzone* 187.) *3rd October 2003.*

Price, Susan. **A Sterkarm Kiss.** Scholastic Press, ISBN 0-439-97838-6, 303pp, hardcover, cover by Shane Rebenschied, £12.99. (Juvenile sf novel, first edition; sequel to *The Sterkarm Handshake*, which won the *Guardian* Children’s Fiction Prize for 1998 and was shortlisted for the Carnegie Medal; like the previous novel, it involves time-travel to the era of the Anglo-Scottish Border Reivers – or a quarrelsome people very like them.) *October 2003.*

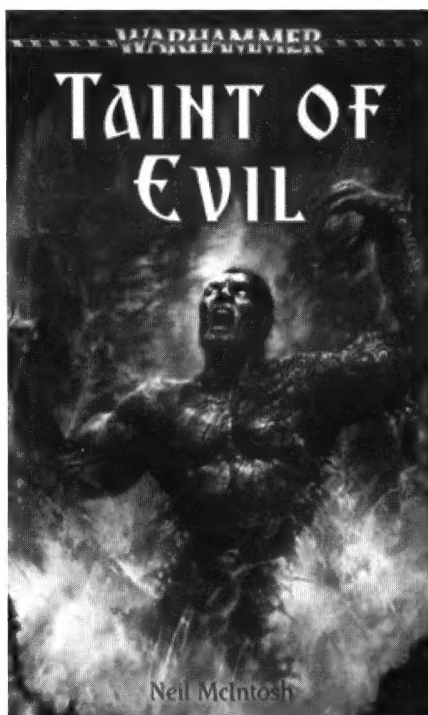
Reed, Robert. **Down the Bright Way.** Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-255-8, 358pp, A-format paperback, cover by Lee Gibbons, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1991; a reissue of one of Reed’s early novels, this is probably its first appearance in Britain.) *2nd October 2003.*

Resnick, Mike, ed. **Men Writing Science Fiction as Women.** DAW, ISBN 0-7564-0165-8, 319pp, A-format paperback, \$6.99. (Sf anthology, first edition; follow-up to *Women Writing Science Fiction as Men* [June 2003], it contains “19 all-original tales by talented men who have taken up the challenge of envisioning the future as women would see it”; contributors include M. Shayne Bell, Jack Dann, Scott Edelman, David Gerrold, Stephen Leigh, Barry N. Malzberg, Frank M. Robinson, Robert J. Sawyer, Robert Sheckley and Dean Wesley Smith, among others – some of whom are regular contributors to the ongoing Martin H. Greenberg “pulp” [although he’s not named as co-editor, the copyright is shared by Tekno Books, which is Greenberg’s company].) *November 2003.*

Reynolds, Alastair. **Diamond Dogs, Turquoise Days.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07516-3, 231pp, A-format paperback, cover by Chris Moore, £5.99. (Sf omnibus, first published in the UK, 2003; it contains two novellas, originally published separately in limited editions: *Diamond Dogs* [PS Publishing, 2001] and *Turquoise Days* [Golden Gryphon Press, 2002]; both are set in “the Revelation Space universe.”) *9th October 2003.*

Rice, Anne. **Blood Canticle: The Vampire Chronicles.** Chatto & Windus, ISBN 0-701-17355-6, 306pp, hardcover, £17.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 2003; yet another volume in the author’s bestselling vampiric series – in which “Lestat really is back with a vengeance” – it’s dedicated sadly: “For Stan Rice, 1942-2002 – the love of my life.”) *6th November 2003.*

Robertson, Andy W., ed. **William Hope Hodgson’s Night Lands, Volume I: Eternal Love.** “A Wildside Dark Fantasy.” Betancourt & Company [PO Box 301, Holicong, PA 18928-0301, USA], ISBN 1-59224-678-8, 381pp, hardcover, cover by Stephen Fabian, \$34.95. (Sf/horror anthology, first edition; this is a gathering of







recently-written stories [and a poem] set in the world of Hodgson's far-future novel *The Night Land* [1912]; two of the stories first appeared in *Interzone*, but otherwise all the contents are new;

contributors include Nigel Atkinson, Nigel Brown, Brett Davidson, James Stoddard, Lucy Ward and John C. Wright; an interesting volume, and first of a proposed series, it's very much a labour of love – recommended; "Betancourt & Company" appears to be a renaming of Wildside Press, or maybe it is a new sub-imprint of that print-on-demand publisher; this is also described as "An Alan Rodgers Book," which adds to the confusion [Rodgers must be the in-house editor]; see the publishers' website – [www.wildsidepress.com](http://www.wildsidepress.com) – to order; November 2003.

Rodrigues, Luís, ed. **Breaking Windows.** "A Fantastic Metropolis sampler." Prime Books [PO Box 36503, Canton, OH 44735, USA], ISBN 1-894815-59-9, 245pp, trade paperback, cover by Hawk Alfredson, \$17.95. (Sf/fantasy anthology, first edition; "reprinted" from the *Fantastic Metropolis* website, an e-zine set up in October 2001 with Michael Moorcock's participation, this book contains a mixture of stories, articles and interviews by Barrington J. Bayley, Carol Emshwiller, Jeffrey Ford, Rhys Hughes, China Miéville, Moorcock, Dan Pearlman, Rachel Pollack, James Sallis, Jeff VanderMeer, Zoran Zivkovic and others; there is some interesting material here; Brian Aldiss, Paul Di Filippo and Neil Gaiman commend it on the cover; to order, see [www.primebooks.net](http://www.primebooks.net); Prime Books is a print-on-demand publishing house run by Sean Wallace.) No date shown: received in October 2003.

Russo, Richard Paul. **Unto Leviathan.** Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-270-1, 442pp, A-format paperback, cover by Bruce Jensen, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA as *Ship of Fools*, 2001; a generation-starship novel in sub-Gene Wolfean vein, it received considerable praise and won the Philip K. Dick Award for best paperback-original sf; reviewed, under its American title, by Nick Gevers in *Interzone* 167.) November 2003.

Shepard, Lucius. **Floater.** Introduction by Jeffrey Ford. PS Publishing [Hamilton House, 4 Park Ave., Harrogate, N. Yorks. HG2 9BQ], ISBN 1-902880-79-X, ix+154pp, small-press trade paperback, cover by Edward Miller, £10. (Horror/crime novella, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen], priced at £25; it's a signed edition, limited to 500 numbered paperback copies and 400 numbered hardcover copies; Jeffrey Ford professes to find Shepard's writing reminiscent of Robert Louis Stevenson's – in both, "the writing... flows like water, a perfect variation of both long and short sentences that emulates the musical rise and fall of a natural storyteller's voice.") September 2003.

Sidney-Fryer, D. **Songs & Sonnets Atlantean: The Second Series.** Wildside Press [PO Box 301, Holcong, PA 18928-0301, USA], ISBN 1-59224-148-4, 152pp, trade paperback, \$15. (Collection of fantasy verse, first edition; Donald Sidney-Fryer is a long-established minor poet in "the great line of California Romantics that stretches from Ambrose Bierce [and] George Sterling... to Clark Ashton Smith"; his original volume of *Songs & Sonnets Atlantean* appeared from Arkham House in 1971 [the last book to be published there by that press's founder, August Derleth]; this "Second Series" is new, although some of its poems have appeared in various small-press magazines and pamphlets over the years; to order, see the publishers' website: [www.wildsidepress.com](http://www.wildsidepress.com).) No precise date shown: received in September 2003.

Smith, Chris. **The Lord of the Rings: Weapons and Warfare: An Illustrated Guide to the Battles, Armies and Armour of Middle-earth.** Foreword by Christopher Lee. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-713566-1, vi+218pp, large-format hardcover, £20. (Copiously illustrated companion to the imaginary weapons, armour, warrior garb, battle sites, etc., in the trilogy of fantasy movies by Peter Jackson based on J. R. R. Tolkien's novel; first edition; there is a simultaneous trade paperback edition [not seen], priced at £12.99.) 6th November 2003.

Stephensen-Payne, Phil. **Barry N. Malzberg: Dweller in the Deeps–A Working Bibliography.** "Galactic Central Bibliographies for the Avid Reader, Volume 58." Galactic Central Publications [25A Copgrove Rd., Leeds LS8 2SP], ISBN 1-871133-63-7, x+120pp, small-press paperback [A5, saddle-stitched], £5. (Sf author bibliography, first edition; Barry Malzberg [born 1939] is one of the most

prolific writers around, hence, at 120 pages, this is larger than most Galactic Central bibliographies; the mysteries of Malzberg's complex publishing career are all expertly delved into here; recommended, as usual with this long-running series, to the bibliophiles.) October 2003.

Stevens, Alan, and Fiona Moore. **Liberation: The Unofficial and Unauthorised Guide to Blake's 7.** Foreword by David Maloney. Telos Publishing [61 Elgar Ave., Tolworth, Surrey KT5 9JP], 1-903889-54-5, 228pp, trade paperback, cover by Dariusz Jasiczak, £9.99. (Lightly illustrated guide to the BBC TV sf series created in the 1970s by scriptwriter Terry Nation and producer David Maloney; first edition; there is a simultaneous "deluxe" hardcover edition [not seen], priced at £30; like its predecessors [on the American TV series *Stargate SG-1* and 24], this book is sizeable, very detailed, and nicely produced; for ordering information see the publishers' website: [www.telos.co.uk](http://www.telos.co.uk).) 25th September 2003.

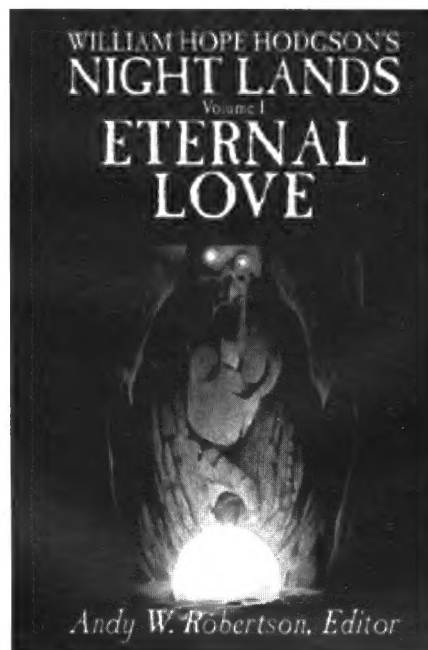
Straub, Peter. **Lost Boy Lost Girl.** HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-714230-7, 281pp, hardcover, £17.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 2003; it's described as "a nerve-shredding new chiller about the persistence of evil.") 20th October 2003.

Sullivan, Tricia. **Maul.** "A science fiction novel of sex, shopping and terrorbugs." Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-312-0, 355pp, C-format paperback, cover by Lee Gibbons, £10.99. (Sf novel, first edition; the title would seem to be a pun on "mall," as in shopping mall; this is a fourth sf novel by the American writer [born 1968; resident in Britain since 1995] whose third, *Dreaming in Smoke*, won the Arthur C. Clarke Award; the publishers extol the new book's "explosive action, cutting-edge science and sparkling prose.") 2nd October 2003.

Swanwick, Michael. **Cigar-Box Faust and Other Miniatures.** Tachyon Publications [1459 18th St., #139, San Francisco, CA 94107, USA], ISBN 1-892391-07-4, 94pp, trade paperback, cover by Freddie Baer, \$14.95. (Sf/fantasy collection, first edition; it consists of a number of very short stories and imaginative pieces, many of them previously published in *Asimov's SF*, the *New York Review of SF* and elsewhere.) 15th November 2003.

Tarr, Judith. **House of War.** Roc, ISBN 0-451-52900-6, 376pp, trade paperback, cover by Ray Lundgren, £16. (Alternate-history fantasy novel, first edition; a sequel to *Devil's Bargain* [2002], it concerns the further adventures of Richard the Lionheart, who, in Tarr's imaginary timeline, wins his battles in the Holy Land, and lives on...) October 2003.

Thomsen, Brian M., and Martin H. Greenberg, eds. **The Repentant.** DAW, ISBN 0-7564-0163-1, vii+313pp, A-format paperback, cover by Cliff Nielsen, \$6.99. (Horror anthology, first edition; it contains



"13 original tales of werewolves, witches, the dead, the undead, and the demonic who have found their way from darkness to light," by P. N. Elrod, Jeff Grubb, Nina Kiriki Hoffman, Tanya Huff, Jody Lynn Nye, Jean Rabe, Edo van Belkom, Chelsea Quinn Yarbro and others; this is, in effect, the latest issue of the ongoing DAW/Greenberg paperback "pulp magazine.") *October 2003.*

Turtledove, Harry. **American Empire: The Victorious Opposition.** Hodder & Stoughton, ISBN 0-340-82013-6, 496pp, hardcover, cover by Steve Stone, £18.99. (Alternate-history sf novel, first published in the USA, 2003; follow-up to *American Empire: Blood & Iron* [2001] and *American Empire: The Centre Cannot Hold* [2002] from the ridiculously prolific Mr Turtledove [see below].) *20th October 2003.*

Turtledove, Harry. **In the Presence of Mine Enemies.** New American Library, ISBN 0-451-52902-2, 454pp, hardcover, cover by Steve Stone, \$24.95. (Alternate-history sf novel, first edition; like his previous NAL title, *Ruled Britannia* [2002], this appears to be a stand-alone Turtledove novel, not a part of one of his interminable series; it's another "what-if-Hitler-had-won-World-War-II?" tale, but set in the 21st century, long after the presumed victory.) *November 2003.*

Turtledove, Harry. **Rulers of the Darkness.** Earthlight, ISBN 0-7434-6851-1, 676pp, A-format paperback, cover by Bob Eggleton, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2002; follow-up to *Into the Darkness* [1999], *Darkness Descending* [2000] and *Through the Darkness* [2001] in the ongoing series about a world war "in a world where magic works.") *6th October 2003.*

VanderMeer, Jeff. **Veniss Underground.** Tor (UK), ISBN 1-4050-3268-5, 177pp, C-format paperback, cover by Larry Rostant, £10.99. (Sf/fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2003; the opening section originally appeared as a short story, "Quin's Shanghai Circus," in *Interzone* 124; reviewed by Liz Williams in the present issue.) *17th October 2003.*

Waiton, Evangeline. **The Mabinogion.** "Fantasy Masterworks, 39." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07538-4, 719pp, B-format paperback, cover by Alan Lee, £8.99. (Fantasy omnibus, first edition in this format; it contains four novels, based on the Welsh legendary cycle *The Mabinogion*, first published in the USA as *The Virgin and the Swine* [1936; later retitled *The Island of the Mighty*], *The Children of Llyr* [1971], *The Song of Rhiannon* [1972] and *Prince of Annwn* [1974]; after a long career, for the most part lived in obscurity, the author [born in Indianapolis, in 1907], died in 1996; she won the World Fantasy Lifetime Achievement Award in 1989; this volume is recommended to all lovers of high fantasy who have yet to discover these books.) *9th October 2003.*

Watson, Ian. **Mockymen.** Golden Gryphon Press [3002 Perkins Rd., Urbana, IL 61802, USA], ISBN 1-930846-21-5, 324pp, hardcover, cover by Steve Montiglio, \$26.95. (Sf/horror novel, first edition; the blurb summarizes it as a tale of "Nazis, drugs, Black Magic, and aliens"; the first section appeared originally as a novella, "Secrets," in *Interzone* 124, October 1997; this is another attractively-designed volume from Golden Gryphon, their 29th book; to order, see the publishers' website: [www.goldengryphon.com](http://www.goldengryphon.com).) *October 2003.*

Watt-Evans, Lawrence. **Dragon Venom.** "The stunning conclusion to the Obsidian Chronicles." Tor, ISBN 0-765-30279-9, 416pp, hardcover, \$25.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; follow-up to *Dragon Weather* [1999] and *The Dragon Society* [2001]; presumably the publishers are unembarrassed by the fact that they have just begun an "Obsidian Trilogy" [see under Mercedes Lackey, above] in the same month they are concluding these "Obsidian Chronicles.") *8th October 2003.*

Webb, Nick. **Wish You Were Here: The Official Biography of Douglas Adams.** Headline, ISBN 0-7553-1155-8, x+370pp, hardcover, £18.99. (Biography of the late humorous sf writer, first edition; it contains 16 pages of black-and-white photographs; the author worked in publishing for many years, and while at Pan Books was responsible for commissioning Adams's first novel, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* [1979]; this is the second full-length life of Adams to have appeared this year – the first was M. J. Simpson's *Hitchhiker: A Biography of Douglas Adams* [Hodder & Stoughton, March 2003].) *6th October 2003.*

Westerfield, Scott. **The Killing of Worlds: Book Two of Succession.** Tor, ISBN 0-765-30850-9, 336pp, hardcover, \$25.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; the

conclusion of a diptych which began with *The Risen Empire* [2003] – which was blurbled confidently as "a sweeping epic... the first great space opera of the 21st century." *22nd October 2003.*

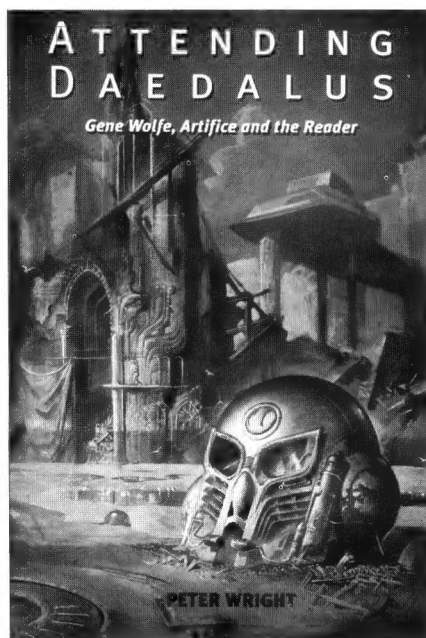
Williams, Walter Jon. **The Sundering: Dread Empire's Fall, Book Two.** Earthlight, ISBN 0-7434-6125-8, 452pp, C-format paperback, cover by Bob Warner, £10.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA [?], 2003; follow-up to *The Praxis* [2002], in this very large-scale space opera.) *10th November 2003.*

Wright, John C. **The Golden Transcendence.** "Book Three of The Golden Age." Tor, ISBN 0-765-30756-1, 350pp, hardcover, \$25.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; follow-up to *The Golden Age* [2002] and *The Phoenix Exultant* [2003]; the first two volumes were reviewed by Nigel Brown in *Interzone* 183 and 192.) *19th November 2003.*

Wright, Peter. **Attending Daedalus: Gene Wolfe, Artifice and the Reader.** "Liverpool Science Fiction Texts and Studies." Liverpool University Press, ISBN 0-85323-828-6, xv+237pp, C-format paperback, cover by Bruce Pennington, £20. (Critical study of a major American sf writer, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen], priced at £45; the author is a lecturer in English Literature and Film at Edge Hill College of Higher Education, Ormskirk; this work, billed as "the first book-length study of Gene Wolfe's tetralogy *The Book of the New Sun* and its sequel *The Urth of the New Sun*," looks to be interesting and timely; recommended to all Wolfeans.) *October 2003.*

Zelazny, Roger. **Damnation Alley.** "Gollancz SF Collectors' Editions." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07346-2, 157pp, C-format paperback, cover by Chris Moore, £9.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1969; this post-bomb biker yarn has always seemed a fairly minor work, even with the late Zelazny's variable canon, but is now being touted as "the classic postnuclear adventure novel from one of the most influential writers of his generation.") *16th October 2003.*

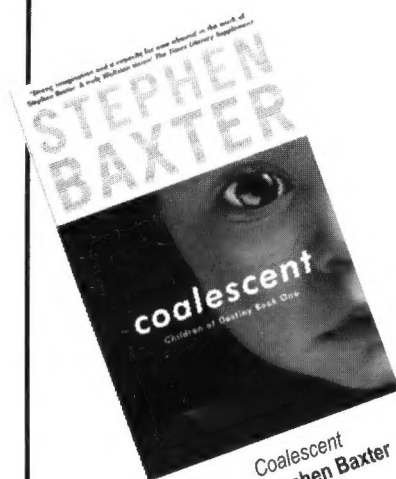
Zubrin, Robert. **The Holy Land.** Polaris Books [11111 W. 8th Ave., Unit A, Lakewood, CO 80215, USA], ISBN 0-9741443-0-4, v+298pp, trade paperback, \$14.95. (Sf novel, first edition; by a scientist author mainly known for his pop-science books, such as *The Case for Mars*, this utilizes an alien invasion-of-America scenario in what is described by the publishers as a "madcap, role-reversed science-fiction satire on the Middle East crisis and the War on Terrorism" which takes sf "back to its Swiftian roots"; Greg Bear and Gregory Benford commend it, as does political commentator Daniel Pipes; the author himself compares his book to the Czech writer Karel Capek's classic satire *War with the Newts* [1936].) *15th November 2003.*



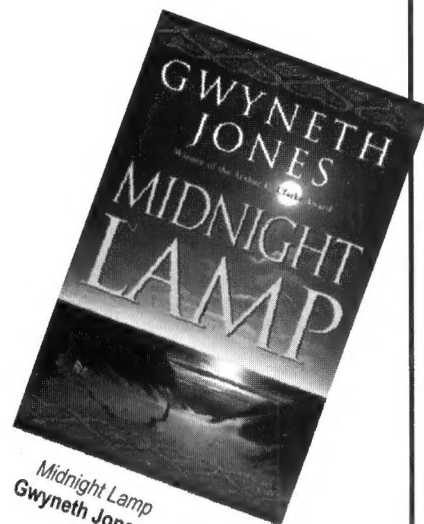


THE  
**ARTHUR C. CLARKE**  
AWARD

**Which  
of these  
novels  
will be  
chosen  
as the  
best of  
the year?**



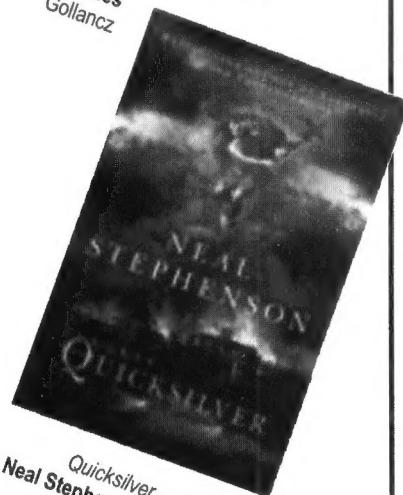
Coalescent  
Stephen Baxter  
Gollancz



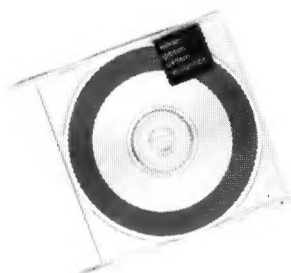
Midnight Lamp  
Gwyneth Jones  
Gollancz



Darwin's Children  
Greg Bear  
HarperCollins



Quicksilver  
Neal Stephenson  
Heinemann



Pattern Recognition  
William Gibson  
Penguin Viking



Maul  
Tricia Sullivan  
Orbit

The decision of the judges  
will be announced in May.  
Read the books first and  
make your own mind up.

The Arthur C. Clarke Award is administered by the Serendip Foundation  
and judged by representatives of the British Science Fiction  
Association, the Science Fiction Foundation and the Science Museum.